



# FORM-BASED CODE



**PLANNER'S PORTFOLIO**

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# PLANNER'S PORTFOLIO **FORM-BASED CODE**

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## **Planner's Portfolio Series**

The Planner's Portfolio Series is an outreach effort developed by Delaware County Council in order to explore the planning concepts available for communities to take advantage of the unique opportunities across Delaware County.

The pattern on the cover page, and found throughout this series, represents the importance of each individual component in the larger network. The Planner's Portfolio Series explores several of these components and how they can support community character in Delaware County.

For more information, contact the Delaware County Planning Department at 610-891-5200 or visit [www.co.delaware.pa.us/planning](http://www.co.delaware.pa.us/planning) to see the complete Planner's Portfolio series.

# OVERVIEW

A Form-Based Code is an **alternative** to a regular zoning code that allows municipalities to manage the look and feel of their community.

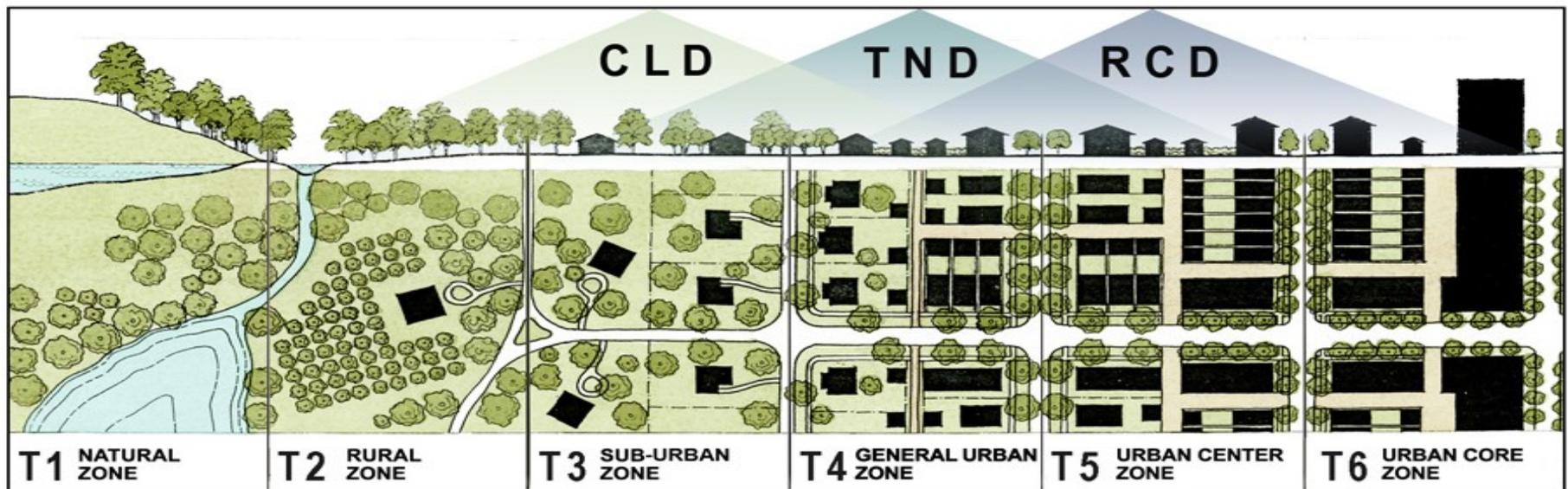
While traditional zoning focuses on use (with little to no emphasis on appearance), form-based code focuses on **aesthetics**, and uses fall in line in order to maintain or encourage visually appealing areas.

Communities looking for a way to **preserve** open space and enhance a specific style of built structures in their town should consider a

form-based code overhaul to their zoning code, or a combination of form-based and traditional zoning techniques.

The first step towards implementing form-based code is identifying how you want your township or city to look; the code is then built out around these **design choices** in order to guide future development, and maintain or encourage visually appealing areas.

## THE TRANSECT AND COMMUNITY UNITS



Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company

A **transect** is a common image associated with form-based codes, and can be one good tool for the organization of a form-based code. It can be helpful in some situations, but should be considered thoroughly by a community considering its use. Once a transect is planned, building types can be slotted into the appropriate categories in order to influence the look and feel of a neighborhood. To learn more about building types, visit the form-based codes institute at [formbasedcodes.org](http://formbasedcodes.org)

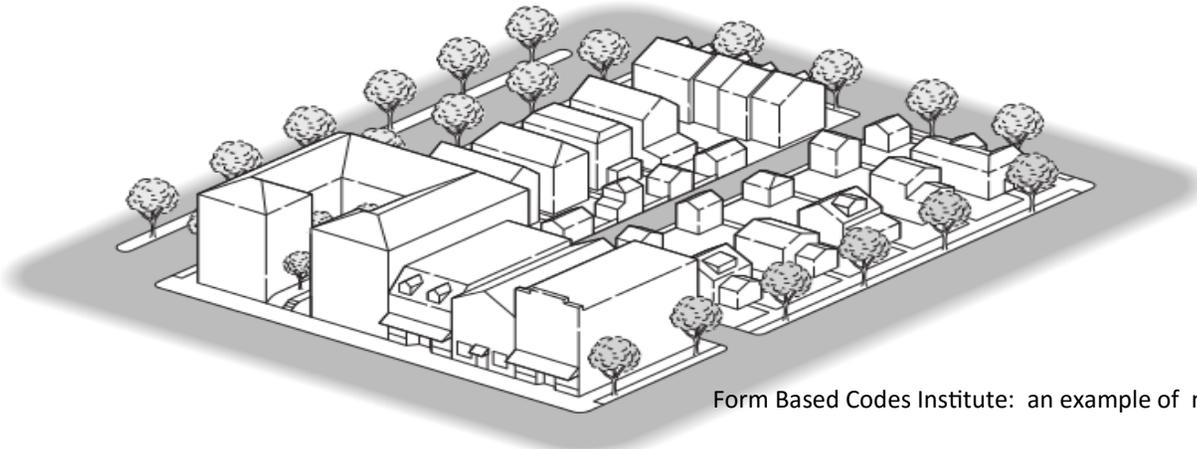
# FORM BEFORE FUNCTION

Form-based code prioritizes the **character** and design of a place over the extensive and detailed permitting of individual uses. Municipalities utilizing form-based codes will still maintain some regulation and permitting of land uses, but will be able to exercise greater influence over the design and appearance of new development and better maintain an established and unified look to the community.

A coherent **vision** is necessary before writing a form-based code: you must decide how you want districts to **look and feel** when residents are walking or driving around. If you decide that a typical gas station is not a building you want in the center of your commercial district due to the traffic, curb cuts, and unsightliness of the typical gas station design, you can require an architectural style that would exclude those elements. However, If a builder were to find a **creative** way to build a gas station that does not look or smell like a gas station (parking in the rear, low impact, thoughtful architecture), that would be encouraged under form-based code.



The Form-Based Codes Institute provides ample documents, examples, and resources for municipalities to begin the process of switching to form-based codes. They can be found at [formbasedcodes.org](http://formbasedcodes.org).



Form Based Codes Institute: an example of mixed use that can arise from form-based code

**Form-Based Codes**

“They divide a community into different districts based on the *character and intensity of land development*, as well as the desired urban form. They are based upon a *shared vision of the kind of place the community desires*, not on separating a community into different use areas.

“[form-based codes] include specifications of what uses are permitted in a building or place, but focus on the physical character of development. They are a method of development regulation, adopted into municipal or county code, *that emphasizes the physical character (form) and includes—but often de-emphasizes—the regulation of land use*. Land use is regulated more broadly, with land use categories in lieu of specific permitted uses.”

- Mary Madden and Joel Russell, *What is Form Based Code?*



1. Traditional Zoning does not see the difference between these two buildings
2. Or these...
3. Or these... because traditional zoning does not prioritize design
4. Creative uses can come about under FBC, like this bank-turned-bar in a mixed-use neighborhood



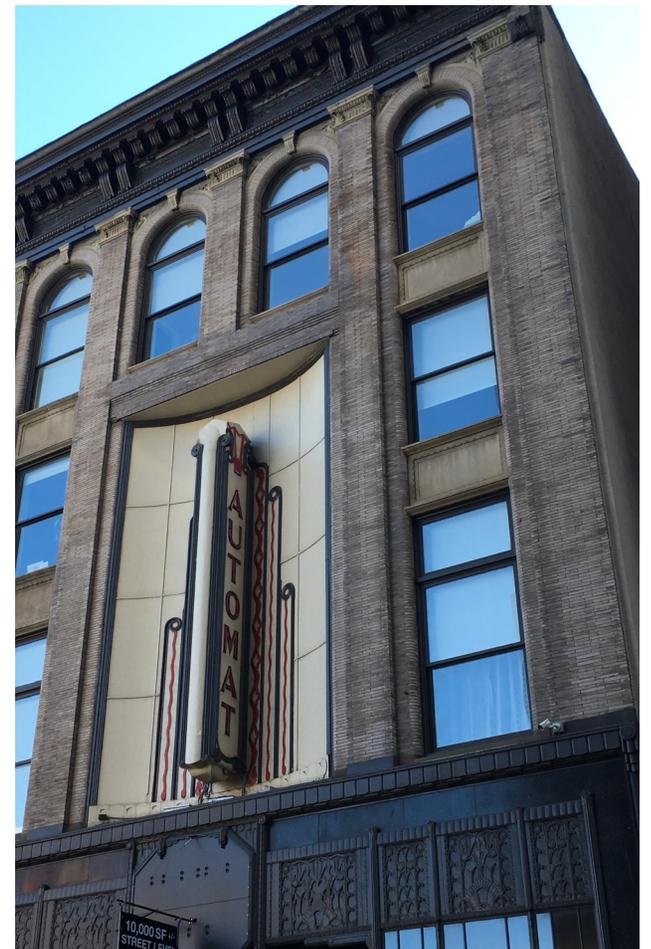
**Creative** uses that fit into the planned look of an area should be expected and encouraged; they can make an area much more interesting, even if they were not predicted. Examples include small multi-family units or commercial uses that seamlessly transition into residential buildings, or restaurants and walking paths next to churches or schools. Adaptive reuse projects can make use of buildings that already fit in with the future vision for the municipality since the appearance was already agreed upon, even if the use was not yet known.

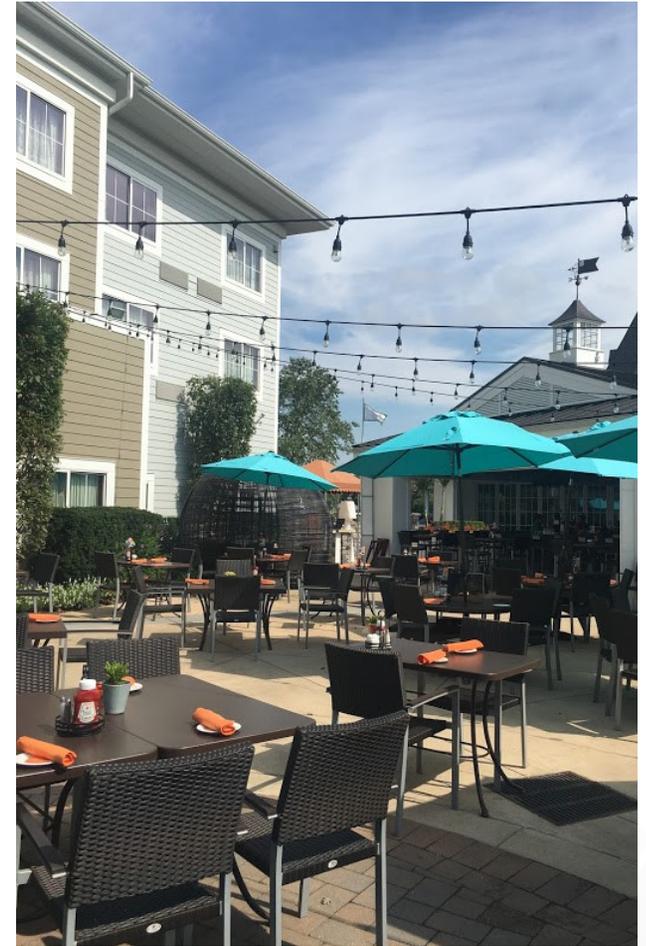
The biggest benefit of FBC is that planners can create **beautiful, walkable, desirable** areas because those places have a particular look. You will not find big box stores, giant parking lots, too many curb cuts or stretches of concrete walls in an area with a curated design.

# CHARACTERISTICS

A form-based code is a product of an articulated vision for a community and a structured, participatory framework for developing the new code. When a community values **visually pleasing buildings** they can go through the process to create the right zoning framework. Zones are planned based on their **relationships to transportation and the public spaces** between buildings, and character, rather than the separation of uses. A good code allows flexibility of use while preserving the built environment. Form-based codes also enhance mixed-use areas and allow for individuals with a variety of ages and abilities to access the space. Form-based code creates a feeling of community by emphasizing public spaces. This is done by prioritizing pedestrian spaces, and **regulating visual cues** in architecture, signage, and vegetation in order to create a complete streetscape.

Density is not the goal of a form-based code, but it can be a benefit. Through form, a multi-family building can look the same from the outside as a single family home, or an apartment building can look like a classy department store by **dictating architectural standards** that fit the character of the community. Developers follow suit by building projects that the **community needs** while conforming to the look that the community chose.





“FBCs encourage: a mix of land uses, a mix of housing, it is proactive (focuses on wants instead of community dislikes), results from a public design process, fits specific places and reflects local architecture, emphasizes site design and building form, provides “sense of place,” and is easier to use than conventional zoning codes.”  
 - Mary Madden and Joel Russell, *What is Form Based Code?*



# BENEFITS

Form-based code brings **community vision** to life. It makes public spaces **walkable and rich in character**, and over time creates places that draw people to them. In doing so, it can protect the parts of a community's character that are desirable and shape surrounding areas to fit that character. It also allows for **market flexibility** over time. Mixed-use also thrives under form-based code; they are a good time-saving solution for zoning boards with a high volume of requests for variances: when the vision and design standards are clear, owners and developers have the flexibility to creatively design buildings that fit in with the character that the community wants.

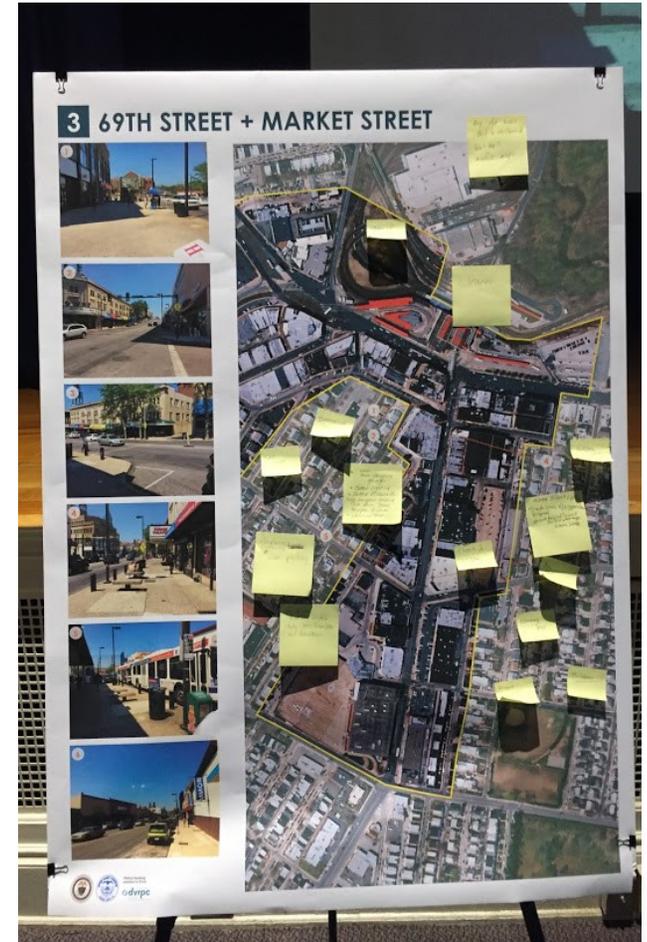
Form-based code encourages walkable, mixed-use areas for better **commerce and lifestyle**.



# PROCESS

It is vital for a community to begin with a **comprehensive plan** that outlines the vision of its municipality. With the plan in place, the zoning code can be updated to represent the physical characteristics that a community desires.

An extensive **public participation** process is required to achieve a successful transition to a form-based code. This is a vital step in achieving a vision that can be agreed upon by many residents and the best way to ensure that the new standards meet the community vision. An educational component during planning and **community outreach** is important for the code's success as it details how form-based codes differ from traditional zoning and aligns **community vision**.



Municipalities should also consider hiring an expert—someone who has undertaken form-based code implementation successfully before—and should also seek the help of an architectural consultant to interpret the community's desired vision as there are several variations on a form-based code:

**Mandatory/Exclusive:** Can be implemented in all or part of the municipality and is frequently used for main street enhancement and historic neighborhood preservation. If implemented in only select parts of the town while Euclidian (traditional) zoning is still operating in others, it is considered *Mixed* code. Form-based code can be implemented in certain areas while traditional, Euclidian zoning is still operating in others.

**Parallel:** Used as an overlay to traditional zoning, and the land owner can choose which to follow (while subjected to some limitations). Most often used for new, large-tract developments where developers can be incentivized to design by certain standards.

**Floating** (not mapped out at time of adoption): Allows a landowner to rezone and prepare a development plan, similar to *Planned Unit Development* but with form-based code design standards; essentially a way to incentivize developers to use form-based code in new developments.

*If you are looking to encourage a sense of place and maintain character in your community, consider changing to a Form Based Code.*



## CHARACTER AREAS

March 2016



## COMMUNITY PLACEMAKING

March 2016



## NATIONAL TRENDS

September 2017



Court House and Government Center  
201 West Front Street  
Media, Pennsylvania 19063

### Delaware County Council

John P. McBlain, Chairman  
Colleen P. Morrone, Vice Chairman  
Michael Culp  
Kevin M. Madden  
Brian P. Zidek

### County Executive

Marianne Grace

### Planning Department

Linda F. Hill, Director  
Sam Haber, Manager  
Kiersten Mailler, Associate Planner

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