Drafting a new zoning ordinance is tricky when everyone's watching.
Think of New Orleans, and you think of a place where personal freedom comes first, a welcoming city not beholden to rules. In fact, however, New Orleanians are extremely concerned about regulating development in their community, especially if new ideas run counter to the city’s traditional neighborhood patterns.

You see the results of that concern in the 1970s zoning ordinance, which is still in effect. That rather general code—it tried to provide rules that would fit many different neighborhoods—is loaded with amendments and patches to respond to specific conditions. Several neighborhoods went so far as to draft their own “neighborhood-specific” zoning districts, which were then incorporated into the ordinance. The result, says Leslie Alley, deputy director of the city planning commission, “is that people can’t easily determine the rules that affect their site, and when they do, they find that many commonly accepted types of development cannot be achieved without a variance.”

In 2001, local planners drafted a new ordinance, but it was never adopted. In part, that was because people could not clearly understand how its provisions would affect their neighborhoods. One complaint was that the drafters of this ordinance were not guided by a master plan or a set of development policies. Also, says Alley, “the ordinance was drafted without substantial public input. In the end, it lacked the support needed for adoption.”

Getting religion
All this changed after Hurricane Katrina, when national planning attention focused on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. That flurry of attention culminated in the city’s commitment in June 2008 to produce a combined master plan and comprehensive zoning ordinance. The New Orleans 2030 Master Plan is still under review, but enough of it is in place to envision how new zoning can help to bring about its policies. Indeed, says Yolanda Rodriguez, the executive director of the city planning commission, the two documents are solidly intertwined.

My firm, Camiros, Ltd., was part of the consulting team responsible for both the master plan and the zoning ordinance. The Boston consulting firm, Goody Clancy, led the work on the plan while we focused on the zoning ordinance. The team worked together to ensure that its products would be fully integrated. We used the extensive public participation process, for instance, to identify neighborhood planning and zoning issues, and we based the zoning code on the placemaking policies that are part of the master plan.

These policies reflect the fact that New Orleans is many cities—a result of its long history. The earliest city, the one that tourists know best, is the “original city” of the French Quarter and the adjacent neighborhoods of Marigny and Treme, settled before the Civil War. Later came the “traditional urban” neighborhoods that were urbanized during the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The “modern city” developed after World War II.

Each of these areas reflects the development patterns typical of the times, along with the building technology, transportation, and design influences of those periods. The original city consists of blocks of contiguous buildings showing early French and Spanish influence and accommodating a variety of uses. Later, in the traditional urban city of the Garden District, Uptown, and Central City, we begin to see streetcar-influenced development and the typically French arpent system of land division, which created long and narrow lots, many containing the city’s characteristic “shotgun” houses.

The modern city, influenced by the automobile, is far more suburban in nature, with regular lot sizes and a stricter separation of uses. While all of these areas have evolved over time, the strong preservationist attitudes of residents has kept the neighborhoods distinct. A fourth city is formed by the developments that serve the broader area: the downtown, major commercial districts like Magazine Street, university and hospital precincts, and industrial areas.

While the impacts of Katrina destroyed the physical fabric of many neighborhoods, residents still treasure the qualities that make their neighborhood unique. The tensions surrounding rebuilding have made it clear that the image of the four cities of New Orleans is still intact, and that redevelopment must be responsive to this image.

How place fits in
Place in New Orleans means much more than simply geography and buildings. It reflects the attitudes and interests of residents—and how they make and enforce decisions, says Lou Volz, who chairs the city planning commission’s zoning advisory committee. This approach, which addresses environmental sustainability as well as physical development, is reflected in the emerging zoning ordinance in several ways:

- The zoning districts are designed and grouped to meet the specific needs of each of the four “cities” in terms of building form, site development, use, and sustainability.
- The code’s urban design provisions are flexible enough to allow for the creativity of individual designers.
- Design guidelines are linked to those parts of the comprehensive plan that describe the unique architectural aspects of various neighborhoods. They are organized to reflect the neighborhood types—original city, traditional urban, and modern.
- Uses and the relationships between them respond to established community values and habits. Many New Orleans neighborhoods, particularly the older ones, mix residential, commercial, and industrial uses. Those interrelationships are integrated into the zoning ordinance to ensure livability and to simplify review and approval.
- Some neighborhoods encompass multiple building types that have been developed over decades. Differences are accommodated by the ordinance through flexible siting criteria, use standards, and performance standards.
- To ensure a strong “green” and sustainable orientation, the ordinance integrates traditional and performance-based development standards into the siting, parking, design, landscaping, and site development provisions.

In drafting the new zoning ordinance, we have two key goals: To ensure that future development will reinforce the quality and character of existing development where preservation is desired, and that it will facilitate change where directed by the new master plan. We will shortly be holding community meetings to explain and test the ordinance’s neighborhood-based zoning concepts.

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