



A recent analysis of zoning codes found that, in a sample of 32 U.S. cities, Burlington, Vermont (above), has the most regulatory items related to sustainability. Its ordinance includes stormwater provisions, and encourages mixed uses, higher densities, and local food production.

### RESEARCH YOU CAN USE Toward a grounded theory of sustainable zoning

I was recently asked for a list of planning tools that can be used to promote smart growth. I could come up with only partial lists, for example, from the first article I reviewed for this column back in 2006. That was John Landis's "Growth Management Revisited: A Reassessment of its Efficacy, Price Effects, and Impacts on Metropolitan Growth Patterns." Now I have a complete list, at least of zoning tools.

It comes via an article by Edward Jepson and Anna Haines, "Zoning for Sustainability: A Review and Analysis of the Zoning Ordinances of 32 Cities in the United States," in the most recent issue of *JAPA*. He is at the University of Oregon. She's at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point. It is good to see zoning, this most basic instrument of urban planning, portrayed in a positive light.

The article uses an increasingly popular research approach known as "grounded theory." It does need to be stated that the authors never insinuate the use of

grounded theory in their article, but neither do many researchers who study the world empirically to produce theory.

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method introduced in 1967 by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. On page one of their seminal book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, they describe the process as "the discovery of theory from data—systematically obtained and analyzed in social research." Grounded theory was developed in a period when other qualitative methods were often considered unscientific, and it has achieved wide acceptance in academic circles. It is applied to disciplines as diverse as medicine, law, economics, psychology, sociology, business, education, and planning.

A loose form of grounded theory was used by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*, by Allan Jacobs in *Great Streets*, and by many other leading lights in our field. Grounded theory is frequently used in urban design and physical planning research, where the researcher works inductively to move from empirical examples to generalized theory within the specific uni-

verse under question. Grounded theory at its simplest is about looking for patterns or commonalities that repeat from case example to case example.

Grounded theory operates in a reverse fashion from most social scientific research, in which the researcher chooses an existing theoretical framework, and only then collects data to determine how the theory does or does not apply.

Instead, the search for a new theory starts with the very first piece of data the researcher inspects. As a researcher reviews the data collected, repeated ideas, concepts, or elements become apparent and are tagged with codes. The process of coding involves naming or labeling things, categories, and properties. Coding can be done very formally and systematically or quite informally.

As more data is collected, and as data is reviewed, codes can be grouped into concepts and then into categories. These categories become the basis for an emerging theory. A stopping point is reached when new data does not change the emerging theory anymore.

Back to "Zoning for Sustainability."

Jepson and Haines's research approach has four phases. First, they select a stratified random sample of 32 zoning ordinances to evaluate. These come from large and small municipalities and from all regions of the country. Second, they identify 53 regulatory items that may be present in a zoning ordinance to implement sustainability principles, items such as mixed use land development (present in 81 percent of ordinances) and parking maximums (in 22 percent).

Third, they determine if the regulatory items previously identified are present in their sample of zoning ordinances. Of the 32 municipalities in their sample, Burlington, Vermont, includes the most regulatory items in its zoning ordinance with a score of 33; New London, Connecticut, includes the fewest, with a score of 1 (out of a possible total score of 93). In the fourth and final phase of their study, Jepson and Haines review 15 regulatory items they consider important that appear only rarely in the zoning ordinances, such items as complete streets and green buildings.

One of the criticisms of grounded theory is that it does not produce real theory. While Jepson and Haines have used methodology and gathered the data requisite for producing a grounded theory of sustainable zoning practices, they stop just short of that objective.

What gives hope to the future of sustainable zoning practice, however, is a further finding from their research that newer zoning ordinances contain more sustainability provisions than older ones. With hope for a next round of findings from this research duo, or any others that want to engage the topic, a grounded theory of sustainable zoning practice awaits definition and clarification. Imagine what such a theory could do for the dozens of zoning ordinances that are updated each year across the nation.

—Reid Ewing

*Reid Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of the Journal of the American Planning Association. His book Best Development Practices, published by APA Planners Press, is also an example of grounded theory. More than 40 past columns are available at [www.plan.utah.edu/?page\\_id=509](http://www.plan.utah.edu/?page_id=509).*

## LETTERS

### Immigration pitfalls

"Immigrants Welcome?" (March) raises two fundamental concerns not considered in the article. The first pertains to the immigrants before their arrival in the U.S.: the possible "telegraphing" by the Obama administration to potential immigrants that the border is somehow "open" and the apparent disengagement by Mexico in preventing the flow of illegal immigrants through that country.

The second concern relates to the article's prominent admonition that it is illegal for anyone to be denied housing based on their national origin. While a valid statement, it is inappropriately used. It is not counterbalanced by the analysis that the Obama administration is itself cherry-picking which immigration laws to enforce or to ignore. The article is wrong to assert that a law should be complied with while failing to chastise those who circumvent its obligatory enforcement.

—Stephen Rynas, AICP  
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## PLANNERS LIBRARY

### Exclusive garden suburbs in Texas

Independent scholar Cheryl Caldwell Ferguson has produced *Highland Park and River Oaks: The Origins of Garden Suburban Community Planning in Texas* (2014; University of Texas Press; 336 pp.; \$70). The subtitle captures the book's scope. It begins with less successful precursors and follows up with successors. The approach is thorough and occasionally critical. The maps and illustrations are superb.

The word missing from the title, of course, is "exclusive." Contrary to non-Texans' view, as early as the turn of the 20th century Dallas and Houston were already struggling with "how to properly plan a growing city and protect residential areas from degradation by changes in land use." The developers featured here succeeded in applying comprehensive planning, "originally intended for cities, to a smaller geographic area." The benefits of planning were reserved for the wealthy and the white.

Suburban developments in the 1890s and early 1900s were more urban than suburban in design, and were troubled by recurrent economic crises that pushed their developers into bankruptcy and the



The developers of Highland Park and River Oaks adopted the concepts of the American Dream of homeownership as a place to escape from city pressures and live in a safer, healthier environment.