

# COMPARING FORM-BASED CODES AND URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINES IN THE CENTRAL AREAS OF TWO MOUNTAIN RESORT TOWNS

A Master's Report submitted to the School of Urban and Regional Planning in  
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**Ian Pinchin, September 2017**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Through a case study of two mountain resort towns and four study areas, this research investigates and evaluates the urban design and planning controls in place in Whistler, British Columbia and Mammoth Lakes, California. Specifically, this research evaluates a traditional Euclidian zoning bylaw that emphasizes the regulation of land use over form and its accompanying design guidelines (Resort Municipality of Whistler, BC) and a hybrid code (Mammoth Lakes, California). The question this research aims to answer is:

**How are two mountain resort communities transitioning to incorporating form-based elements into development control tools and code updates?**







The research method used in this report is a qualitative case study comparison that used direct observation, document review, and key informant interviews to evaluate the physical environment and urban design of the study areas, as well as their governing planning controls. The case studies were evaluated under three categories: Resort Development Principles, Urban Design, and Development Control Tools. Each category had a series of evaluation criteria drawn from current and relevant literature. A full summary of the research methods is available in Chapter 3; however, each analysis criterion is ranked according to the legend shown in Table Exec-1 below.

**Table Exec-1: Ranking Scheme Legend**

<b>Does not fulfill</b> 	<b>Minimal fulfillment</b> 	<b>Somewhat fulfills</b> 	<b>Almost fulfills</b> 	<b>Fulfills criteria</b> 
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There are also important limitations to this study, including that the findings listed below are particular to seasonal resort communities, and as such, the results are not generalizable to all other communities. The results of the study found that Whistler satisfied all of the Resort Development Principles while Mammoth Lakes satisfied a range of criteria but not to the same degree as Whistler as shown in table Exec-2

**Table Exec-2: Resort Development Principle Summary**

Resort Development Principle	Whistler	Mammoth Lakes
<b>Milieu</b>		
<b>Multi-Activity Environments</b>		
<b>Town-Centre Hub</b>		

Each study area’s physical built form was evaluated through direct observation and the results are summarized in Table Exec-3. Overall, Whistler Village satisfied the most criteria, with Mammoth Village and Whistler Main Street almost fulfilling all the criteria, while Old Mammoth Road fulfilled almost none of the evaluation criteria.

**Table Exec-3: Built Form Summary**

	Whistler Village	Whistler – Main St.	Mammoth Village	Old Mammoth Road
Imageability				
Enclosure				
Human Scale				
Transparency				
Complexity				
Overall				

Lastly, despite Mammoth Lakes’ built form not satisfying the evaluation criteria to the same extent as Whistler’s, its planning controls satisfied the respective evaluation criteria to a high degree, while Whistler mostly satisfied the criteria as summarized in Table Exec-4.

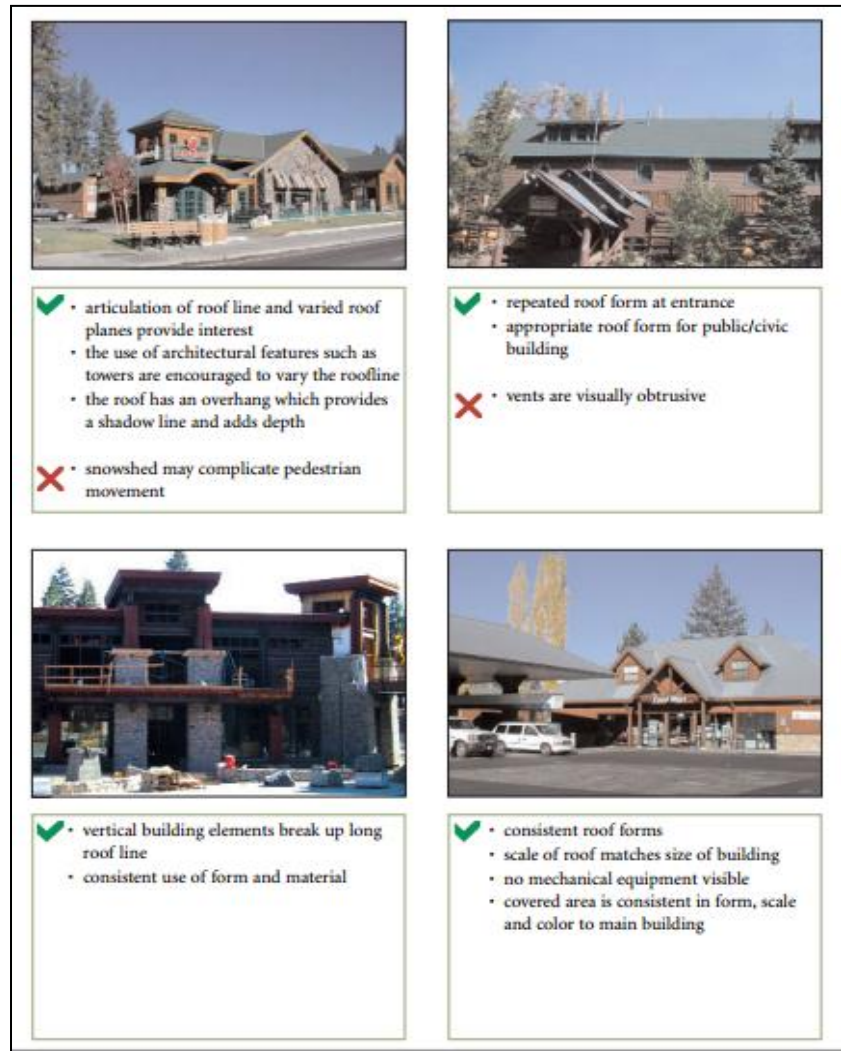
**Table Exec-4: Development Control Tools Analysis Summary**

	Whistler	Mammoth
<b>Vision and Ease of use</b>		
<b>Design Standards</b>		
<b>Overall</b>		

Mammoth’s development control tools were recently updated and as yet, no significant development has been completed under these new controls. While this helps to explain the gap between the lower quality of the built form and comprehensive planning controls, this study also examined a proposed development

in Mammoth Lakes, a supermarket, and compared it to similar developments in other study areas. The study showed that future projects developed under the updated planning controls will contribute to addressing many of the gaps in Mammoth's urban design. The report also concluded that Whistler, despite its traditional planning controls, was developed from a greenfield using a method whereby the Municipality had strong controls on the design and was able to parcel out municipal land under the condition that it be developed in accordance with a master plan and set of design guidelines. This has led to a strong emphasis on maintaining a high-quality design from both the municipality and development community.

This report recommends that other resort communities and smaller municipalities look to Mammoth Lakes and Whistler for examples of how to enhance their urban design and public realm. Mammoth Lakes offers an example of how a small municipality can incorporate form-based standards into its zoning code without the costs (political and economic) of overhauling the entire set of planning controls and developing a true form-based code. Whistler demonstrates how a consistent standard of by-right development can increase a small municipality's control over urban design and have lasting impacts on the quality for design for decades. The report also notes both Whistler and Mammoth Lakes have many elements of form-based codes and that these hybrid codes offer a solution for small municipalities that maintains continuity with familiar traditional zoning controls while introducing more form-based elements and control tools that can significantly improve the built form of their communities.



**Figure Exec-1:** Real examples of recommended design in Mammoth Lakes' codes

The report also contains the following specific recommendations:

- i. Smaller municipalities should seek to implement hybrid codes and use Mammoth Lake's hybrid zoning code as an example.
- ii. It is recommended that Whistler update some of its codes, specifically in the form of updated graphics in the design guidelines. Whistler's graphics are mostly hand sketched

and do not provide a useful schematic for future development. Moreover, Whistler could use Mammoth Lakes as an example and use pictures in conjunction with drawings to highlight real examples of desirable design from the municipality. However, while Mammoth's drawings are clearer than Whistler's, they too could be improved by annotating them with plain language to make the codes more descriptive and accessible to applicants who are not familiar with technical design terminology.

- iii. While form-based codes can be more prescriptive, this report finds they are not entirely necessary for developing successful mountain resort communities. Hybrid codes and design guidelines were both found to contribute to quality urban design.
- iv. Design panel review is present in both case studies and is found to contribute to the development and implementation of each set of codes. It should be implemented in other resort communities as a way to achieve design objectives.