

CRACKING THE CODE OF SMALL DOWNTOWNS:

A comparison of four small downtowns and the codes used to shape their built form

by

Per Lundberg

A report submitted to the School of Urban and Regional Planning in conformity with the program requirements for a Master's degree in Urban and Regional Planning (M.PL.)

School of Urban and Regional Planning
Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
April, 2014

Copyright © Per Lundberg, 2014

Executive Summary

CRACKING THE CODE OF SMALL DOWNTOWNS:

A comparison of four small downtowns and the codes used to shape their built form

Per Lundberg

April 2014

From a case study of three communities and four study areas, the research investigates and evaluates four types of planning controls including a traditional zoning by-law (Township of Cramahe, ON), a hybrid form-



Downtown Colborne, ON
Source: Per Lundberg (2013)



Downtown Truro, NS
Source: Google Street View (2014)

based code/traditional zoning-by-law (Truro, NS), a form-based code (downtown Sylvan Lake, AB) and an urban design guideline (50th Street, Sylvan Lake, AB).

The research question asked is:
What are the relative advantages of hybrid-zoning (HZ), form-based codes (FBC), and urban design guidelines (UDG) compared to traditional/Euclidian zoning for guiding the improvement of the built form of a small town central business district?

The research method used is a qualitative case study research design using observation, interviews and document review to evaluate the built

form and plan of each of the study areas. Evaluation criteria summarized in *Table Exec-4 (p. iv)* were developed primarily from the work of Philip Walker and Kent Robertson on the revitalization of small community downtowns. The 2013 book *Measuring Urban Design* by Reid Ewing and Otto Clemente provided the method and variables to evaluate

the built form of the study areas as it related to the good downtown principles of



Lakeshore Drive –Downtown Sylvan Lake, AB
Source: Google Street View (2014)

pedestrian-friendliness, heritage preservation and mixed-uses.

All of the plans evaluated date from 2007 or later and no significant re-development of the case study areas has occurred using these plans. The existing built form of the study areas varied greatly from poor to very good as did the evaluated planning documents which varied from fair to

very good (*Table Exec-1 & 2, p. iii*). The traditional Euclidian zoning bylaw of the Township of Cramahe scored least well in terms of providing the type of physical design



50th Street (Main Street) – Sylvan Lake, AB
Source: Wikipedia (2014)

guidance necessary to improve the streetscape in accordance with the five principles of good downtowns developed for the research (*Table Exec-4, p. iv*). The evaluated form-based code and hybrid-zoning of downtown Sylvan Lake, AB and Truro, NS, respectively, scored the highest.

The report recommends that the Township of Cramahe adopt the type of urban design guidance provided in the award winning *Town of Truro Land Use ByLaw*. Form-based codes are the current ideal in terms of regulating built form to achieve a pedestrian-friendly streetscape but they are a significant change from the typical land use based zoning. Hybrid zoning maintains continuity with existing zoning practices while introducing urban design controls into a regulatory document similar to a form-based code. With its closer connection to existing zoning practices, hybrid zoning is likely easier for smaller municipalities with less resources to support and develop.

Table Exec-1: Built Form Evaluation Summary

	Downtown Colborne	Downtown Truro	Downtown Sylvan Lake	Main Street Sylvan Lake
IMAGEABILITY				
ENCLOSURE				
HUMAN SCALE				
TRANSPARENCY				
COMPLEXITY				
OVERALL EVALUATION				

Table Exec-2: Plan Evaluation Summary

	Downtown Colborne	Downtown Truro	Downtown Sylvan Lake	Main Street Sylvan Lake
CLEAR PHYSICAL PLAN				
DOWNTOWN HERITAGE PRESERVATION				
PEDESTRIAN-FRIENDLINESS				
FOLLOW DESIGN GUIDELINES				
MIX USES/MULTI-FUNCTIONAL DOWNTOWN				
OVERALL EVALUATION				

Table Exec-3: Ranking Scheme

Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent

Table Exec-4 – Evaluation Criteria

	GOOD DOWNTOWN PRINCIPLE	EVALUATION CRITERIA	FORM BASED CODE PURPOSE/INTENT	MEASUREMENT METHOD	URBAN DESIGN GUIDELINE PURPOSE/INTENT	MEASUREMENT METHOD
1	CLEAR PHYSICAL PLAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Clear goals, objectives, priorities. ❖ Downtown principles 2-5 are followed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form-Based Codes regulate the details that are most important for the successful implementation of walkable, human-scaled neighbourhoods, focusing primarily on urban form while also addressing use and other necessary factors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a logical design framework at the district, street or project/parcel scale to ensure built form quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews
2	DOWNTOWN HERITAGE PRESERVATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Heritage preservation is incorporated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Architecture and landscape design should grow from local climate, topography, history and building practice • The preservation and renewal of historic buildings should be facilitated to affirm the continuity and evolution of society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the conservation of important heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review
3	PROVIDE FOR PEDESTRIAN FRIENDLINESS (DO NOT SUBURBANIZE DOWNTOWN)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Walkability/livability is addressed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The region should include a framework of transit, pedestrian and bicycle systems that provide alternatives to the automobile • Ordinary activities of daily living should occur within walking distance of most dwellings, allowing independence to those who do not drive. • Development should adequately accommodate automobiles while respecting the pedestrian and spatial form of public areas. • Buildings and landscaping should contribute to the physical definition of Thoroughfares as Civic places. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe and attractive pedestrian linkages should be provided between various land uses within the downtown area and surrounding neighbourhoods. • Encourage transparency, multiple store fronts. Restrict off-street parking between street and building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews
4	FOLLOW DESIGN PRINCIPLES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ There are design principles for downtown 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The <i>SmartCode</i> (generic form-based code) is a tool that guides the form of the built environment in order to create and protect development patterns that are compact, walkable and mixed use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Without principles, we design in void, with no rules to guide our process or measure its success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews
5	MIX USES – STRIVE FOR A MULTIFUNCTIONAL DOWNTOWN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Mixed use buildings ❖ Different business types: banking, restaurant, legal, pharmacy, hardware etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbourhoods and Regional Centres should be compact, pedestrian-oriented and Mixed Use. • Neighbourhoods and Regional Centres should be the preferred pattern of development and Districts specializing in a single use should be the exception 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage commercial and mixed-use redevelopment • Create diversity through a mix of uses and housing types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Observation ➤ Document review ➤ Interviews