



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Key to the City: How Zoning Shapes Our World

By Sara C. Bronin

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Aug. 5, 2026 to discuss *Key to the City: How Zoning Shapes Our World*. Sara Bronin is an architect, land-use attorney, professor and, for seven years, was chair of the planning and zoning commission in Hartford, Conn..

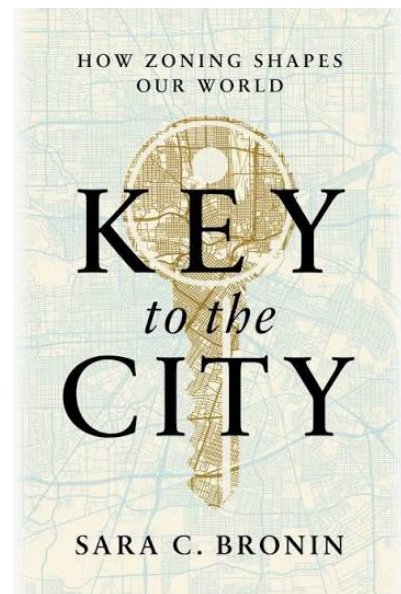
This is a book about how zoning works, how it sometimes harms cities, and how it can be changed so that it facilitates most of the things urbanists want.

This is how Bronin sums up her argument: “The paradox of zoning—the tragedy of zoning—is that it often starts out in a hopeful attempt to improve our cities and the lives we live in them. Then, all too often, it fails; it even does the opposite. Yet, when done right, zoning has the power to make all the difference for a community. Because zoning for good—for more vibrant economies, for greater household security, for more delightful experiences—is both achievable and necessary.”

In other words, she says, mend zoning, don’t end it because “zoning for good” can be a powerful tool in making cities better.

The place to begin, Bronin says, is by deciding what you want your city to be. Then rewrite the zoning codes to facilitate those things, removing some restrictions, creating others, and taking care to speed up the approval process for good developments.

Also, she goes on, be aware that zoning reforms alone won’t change places. You also need appropriate infrastructure, a helpful local government and economic demand. You’ll need to change other city regulations, like lot size requirements and parking mandates. The benefit of all this work: Your city has a much greater chance of becoming a livelier, more appealing place that’s poised for growth.



Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five ideas drawn from *Key to the City* that we believe Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

- If done right, zoning changes can send a powerful signal to residents, future residents, businesses and developers that this part of the city knows where it wants to go and has a plan for getting there.
- Zoning reforms are necessary for lively, growing places but not sufficient. They must be followed by other changes, from ending parking mandates and changing lot-size requirements to incorporating form-based codes so new construction blends with older buildings.
- Along the way, we should seek simpler codes that speed up the building approval process.
- The best zoning takes into consideration not just private property—what can be done with private homes or businesses—but public property as well. This way, we can match private improvements with public investments.
- Zoning reform is difficult. In Urban Atlanta, it is probably best to begin in areas that want and need to change. This would allow other places to see the benefits of better zoning before they begin their own reform efforts.

Why Do These Things?

Key to the City is a guide to zoning and how it can be changed to make cities better. But changing land-use regulations will meet resistance, from homeowners, business owners and even some government officials. Given this, why should we undertake rethinking and simplifying our zoning codes? Here's why:

- It would reduce the time and expense of new construction, which could make housing more affordable. Best estimates are that the cost of complying with Atlanta's present building requirements adds \$25,000 to most projects. We could reduce those costs and speed up construction if we made zoning codes simpler.
- Atlanta's present zoning code is a maze. In fact, there is no single zoning code; there are hundreds of codes that are specific to neighborhoods. The situation is likely the same in other cities in Urban Atlanta. This makes little sense.
- Our aim as urbanists is to create more lively, mixed-use places accessible by bicycles and walking. Our zoning codes make this difficult and, in some cases, impossible.
- Our neighborhoods are changing, due to economic and social forces, but our existing zoning codes make that evolution difficult. One example: work from home. The fact that so many people work today in the places they live suggests that we rethink how neighborhoods work. One possibility: Give the home workers someplace nice to walk to for lunch. Only a zoning code allowing for mixed uses could make that possible.
- Zoning sends a powerful message. Today, it tells us what is not possible. But done right, it could signal what people want. Developers, business owners and potential new residents would hear that signal.

What Are the Obstacles? What Are Our Strengths?

Zoning reform will create opposition. Our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers that the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Neighborhoods are often fearful and suspicious of change.
- Zoning is complicated and hard to explain. The benefits of change can also be difficult to explain.
- Zoning reform requires a good deal of expertise, from understanding land uses and state law to grasping urban planning ideas.
- There are organized advocacy groups. Unfortunately, many are in opposition to any changes in zoning. Any reform process will have to deal with these groups.
- Not many public officials are willing to take on a subject like zoning reform.

- Our existing zoning regulations are the status quo and were set many years ago.
- In the city of Atlanta, 65 percent of the land is zoned for single-family housing. The percentage is likely higher in the suburbs. Changing these regulations to allow more diverse housing types would be a massive undertaking.

Urban Atlanta has strengths that could help us with some of the obstacles. We discussed Urban Atlanta's strengths. Here are a few:

- There is an effort now to revise the city of Atlanta's zoning code.
- There are large tracts of land—former industrial sites, vacant public housing properties and struggling shopping centers—that need a change in zoning. These would be good places to start an effort to reform Urban Atlanta's land use regulations.
- While there are advocates for the status quo, we are also developing advocacy groups for urbanism and housing alternatives. They could be important in zoning reform efforts.
- There are ways of reducing opposition by adding public improvements to proposed changes in a neighborhood's zoning.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles and impressive strengths. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming the barriers, using our strengths:

- As mentioned above, we have large, underdeveloped tracts of land. Opposition to rezoning these tracts will be low and could be good demonstrations of the benefits of more urbanist zoning regulations.
- We could link rezoning to public investments. For instance, if a neighborhood allows for more diverse housing and mixed uses, local governments could pledge to improve sidewalks there and invest in parks and other amenities.
- Good advocacy could be a key to rezoning efforts. We need advocates who communicate well, explain the benefits of change, and point to places where rezoning has led to good outcomes.
- Having a public official as a champion of zoning reform could create momentum for change.

A Synopsis of *Key to the City*

Key to the City: How Zoning Shapes Our World by Sara C. Bronin is 173 pages including an introduction, conclusion and 10 chapters in three sections. There are also acknowledgements, notes and an index. It was published in 2024.

Sara Bronin is an architect, land-use attorney, professor and, for seven years, was chair of the planning and zoning commission in Hartford, Conn. She is director of a research project into zoning's impact on cities and suburbs called the National Zoning Atlas.

As mentioned above, this book explains how zoning works, how it can harm cities, and how it can be changed so that it facilitates most of the things urbanists want, such as density, mixed uses, more housing, livelier neighborhoods and greater pedestrian and cycling access.

Bronin's central message: Mend zoning, don't end it because while zoning has often harmed cities in the past, it can also be a powerful tool for making cities better. The book explains what those good things are, and how they can be written into zoning codes.

This is a very different argument from that in an earlier book we read, *Arbitrary Lines: How Zoning Broke the American City and How to Fix It*. That book found zoning codes so guilty of damaging cities that it suggested simply tossing them out. The hero city of *Arbitrary Lines* was Houston, the only big city without zoning codes.

It turns out, Bronin grew up in Houston, and she does not think it is a good model to follow. She offers her own hero cities: Minneapolis, Nashville, Baltimore, Buffalo, N.Y., Tucson, Ariz., Burlington, Vt. and her home city of Hartford. These cities have changed their zoning codes, sometimes in piecemeal ways, sometimes in sweeping ways. Bronin explains why they made these changes, how they did it, and what the results have been.

Her advice: First, decide what you want your city to be. Then rewrite the zoning codes to facilitate those things, removing some restrictions, creating others, and taking care to speed up the approval process. But also, be aware that zoning reforms alone won't change places, she goes on. You also need appropriate infrastructure, a helpful local government and economic demand.

Zoning is a good place to begin, though, because if the zoning code doesn't restrain cars and doesn't allow mixed uses, greater density, more transit, walkable streets and good urban design, you won't get any of these things.

Where did zoning come from? Most accounts start in the early 20th century, but Bronin begins much earlier, in ancient China, Mesopotamia and Egypt where maps show the locations of walls, temples, parks, plazas and housing. "These maps not only showed what existed," she writes. "Many also show what could be, ancient graphics forming a template for growth to come."

Later, the "city-planning-obsessed Greeks and Romans" extended the effort to bring order to cities, an idea that eventually arrived in America as William Penn laid out Philadelphia, James Oglethorpe designed Savannah, and Pierre Charles L'Enfant created the street design of Washington, D.C. and located its most prominent buildings.

But zoning as a set of laws that are authorized by states, encouraged by the federal government and implemented by localities really did begin in the early 20th century. The first comprehensive zoning code was in New York in 1916. Herbert Hoover, who was U.S. secretary of commerce in the early 1920s, championed the idea and helped create a "model state law" that states could adopt.

By 1925 19 states had adopted some version of the model law and by the following year 425 cities had established zoning codes. The basic idea: Separate land uses so that factories, stores, offices and residences were in different locations. The justification was public health and good order, though preserving land values and racial prejudice were motivators as well.

Over time, Bronin writes, "zoning has become the most significant regulatory power of local government ... Hidden in plain sight, it governs the places we occupy and, by extension, our health, wealth and happiness."

Zoning is a product of its time but, once codified, it becomes an artifact. That is, zoning codes are based on whatever theory of civic prosperity and order exists at the time they are enacted. As cities change, if the codes do not, and they can strangle progress—until someone makes an effort to rethink and reform them.

That is what happened in Hartford, where in 2013 Bronin was appointed to the city planning commission and recruited others to the board who were committed to learning what citizens needed in their neighborhoods and creating zoning codes and planning rules around those desires. An early decision: The existing code was "irredeemable," so Bronin and her colleagues set about writing an entirely new set of rules.

The new code banned fast-food restaurants in some neighborhoods, expanded duplex housing, required tree plantings and ensured that new buildings would be compatible with historic structures. Later, the city not only eliminated parking mandates for housing, stores and offices, it set “maximum parking caps” to prevent developers from building too many parking spaces.

Hartford wasn’t the only city that saw a need for zoning reform. After years of effort, the Minneapolis city council rezoned the entire city in 2021 to allow duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes—housing, Bronin says, that could “comfortably sit alongside single-family housing.” And it authorized accessory dwelling units everywhere. In a single act, then, the Minneapolis leaders rewrote zoning regulations for most of the city.

How did it do this? With leadership from the top and the bottom, Bronin says. That is, with some farsighted political leaders—she gives credit to Lisa Bender, a city council member who eventually became city council president—and an advocacy group called Neighbors for More Neighbors.

The advocacy group trained supporters in how to be effective at public meetings, brought them to meetings and even providing babysitting, as its members “deluged the council” with requests for more and different kinds of housing.

And Hartford isn’t the only city that saw the need for zoning reform. Buffalo shows us the damage that zoning can do, but also how the damage can be repaired.

Buffalo’s zoning code was adopted in 1953, and it cemented into law some of the terrible planning ideas of its era. The most harmful: that because of the rise of the automobile, the road to urban success was, literally, more roads. And lots of parking in downtown Buffalo.

Result: Multilane roads were cut through “dense, vibrant and walkable” neighborhoods, and the downtown was flattened for parking lots required by parking mandates. “Fully half of downtown buildings ultimately fell to parking,” Bronin writes.

Given such sweeping and long-lasting failure, it’s remarkable that, in 2016, Buffalo made a sudden U-turn. It abolished parking mandates and promoted alternative transportation like walking, cycling and transit. It brought in form-based zoning regulations that required that new buildings match those around them and be connected to sidewalks. It required bicycle parking.

And it allowed any building built before 1953 (that is, before the previous zoning code was enacted) to be turned into corner stores, restaurants, offices or taverns anywhere in the city. In doing so, Buffalo’s city council brought mixed uses back to neighborhoods.

Has it made a difference? Yes, Bronin says. The 2020 Census showed that Buffalo’s population had increased for the first time in 70 years. More than 10,000 multifamily housing units have been built since 2016.

As Bronin makes clear, zoning has a long history of damaging cities. So, why not follow Houston’s example and just end it? Because Houston is not the alternative proponents sometime say it is. True, Bronin says, it has no formal zoning code, but in huge parts of the city there’s something far worse: permanent deed restrictions or covenants that require all landowners—or future landowners—to build only what’s permitted in the covenant.

Why is this worse than zoning? A land-use attorney, Bronin explains: “A covenant ‘runs with the land’ forever, unless a court strikes it down, or most or all of the property owners bound by it agree to release it.” This is a “legal straitjacket,” she goes on, which means, unlike bad zoning, it can never be changed.

Zoning reform is not for the faint of heart or those with short attention spans. As the book makes clear, zoning codes are complicated and sometimes contradictory. And the actual city code is only part of the regulation of land that must be changed, if you want to make cities denser, livelier and more sustainable.

What else is needed? Bronin lists them: parking mandate reforms, changes in minimum lot sizes and floor-to-area ratios, the legalization of home-based businesses, requirements for trees that can help with shade and stormwater, and form-based zoning that ensures new buildings are compatible with older ones and provide access for pedestrians and cyclists.

What's the benefit if city leaders and advocates wade deep into land-use regulations and make these changes? In short, better cities. "Through sensible reforms," Bronin promises, "we can end decades of policies that exalt the car. We can permit and even promote the flexibility that will help us deal with pandemics, climate change and broadscale societal shifts. We can boost the diversity of local economies. And we can remove entrenched barriers to opportunity and improve racial and economic equality."

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define "urbanism" broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.