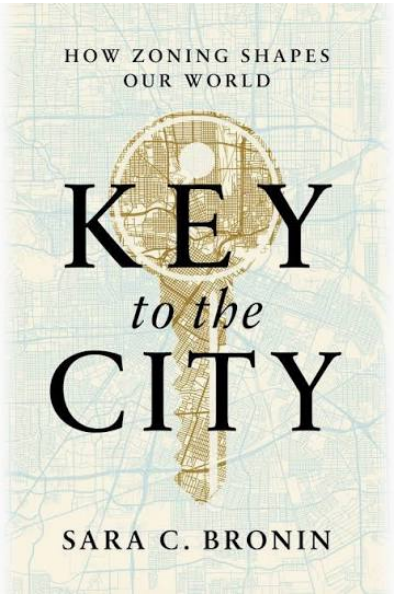
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Key to the City: How Zoning Shapes Our World

By Sara C. Bronin

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.



This is a book about how zoning works, how it sometimes harms cities, and how it can be changed so that it can facilitate 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.

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 for good developments. But also, be aware that zoning reforms alone won't change places. 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 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, but 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."

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Sara C. Bronin's book about reforming city zoning codes and look for lessons for Urban Atlanta.

Our meeting will be **Aug. 5, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307**.

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

There's more information about this discussion at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website.

How to get your copy of *Key to the City*:

- You can purchase a hardcover or paperback copy from a local bookstore, such as Virginia-Highland Books.
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the DeKalb County Public Library.