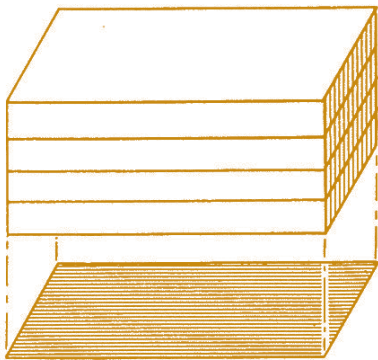
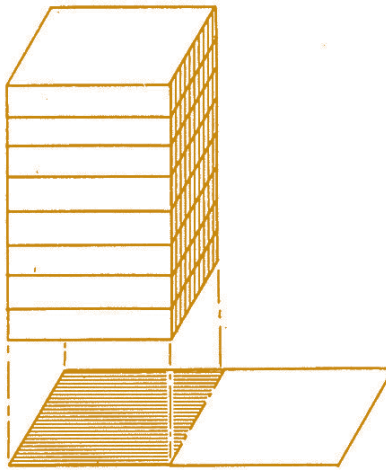


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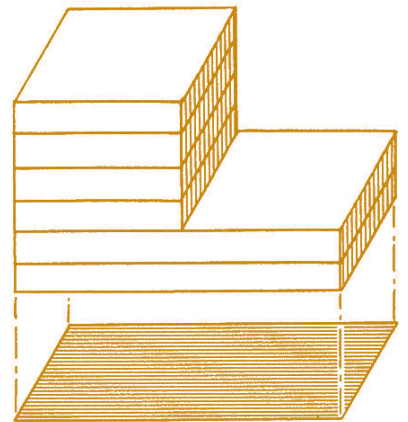
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Zoning Education for Communities

By Joseph DeAngelis

A Zoning 101 presentation as part of your outreach can help to educate the public, elected officials, staff, and other stakeholders on the very basics of zoning and your city's code, maps, and development process.

It's 7:30 on a Tuesday evening. You are at a public forum to discuss revisions to your city's zoning map. The recently revised comprehensive plan identified a declining low-rise commercial stretch as ideal for revitalization. The plan uses phrases such as "mixed use corridor," "town center-style," and "growth-oriented redevelopment."

Over the past three months your office has worked to translate the community aspirations identified in the plan visioning process into a concrete rezoning proposal requiring both a text and map change. The proposal includes a new zoning designation and re-mapping that incentivizes the very type of development in the very same location recommended by the consultant and the community in the comprehensive plan.

This includes, among other changes, doubling the floor area ratio (FAR) and increasing the height limit for mixed use buildings, a reduction in the parking requirement per residential dwelling unit (from two vehicles to 1.5), and the relocation of parking to the rear of the building.

The pushback from community members in attendance, some of whom participated in the visioning process and endorsed the plan's recommendation, is swift. Why are we reducing the parking requirement if we are encouraging new people to live here? Where are they going to park? How can someone own 1.5 cars? Everyone I know has at least two cars. The requirement should be three. Why are you putting parking behind the building? I don't want to have to walk around from the back of the building. What about the height? Why are you allowing taller buildings? A four-story building is completely out of character for this neighborhood. Will these be rental units? How much will they cost?

The questions come quickly, and your answers aren't good enough. You struggle to explain how parking requirements work, or how an FAR bonus for mixed use buildings or the relocation of parking to the rear is meant to realize the type of development recommended in the community's visioning plan. You explain that this is not a development proposal, but a rezoning, and you don't have any information on whether the new units will be rentals or owner occupied.

After the forum wraps up, you struggle to organize your notes. What did they think? Generally, they seemed to be opposed to the measure, though these same people were in favor when it was discussed in more illustrative terms during the visioning process. They liked the buildings and streetscape the consultant drew, but they seemed utterly confused by both the technical terminology you are using and the rules and requirements of the local zoning text and map. You need feedback on the proposal, but what feedback you did receive seemed utterly uninformed or confused. You remember that this isn't an isolated instance. This has happened before. Perhaps a Zoning 101 session is in order.

Zoning is complicated. It's complicated for residents, elected officials, administrators, developers, and architects. It's even complicated for planners not regularly steeped in the plan review or development process. Putting aside the intricacies of zoning as a concept, local zoning itself requires specialized knowledge, fine analytical skills, and big-picture understanding. Planners must understand the zoning code, the zoning map, the local development process, and how the three relate to each other. Think about the complexity of this process for the planner: the small frustrations with this bit of counterintuitive code, the

lines on the map inherited from four decades earlier dividing this residential district from that, or the bizarre flowchart of interagency and interdepartmental review in the development process. Now think about the citizen or elected official at a public meeting to discuss a variance sought by a developer or proposed changes to the zoning map. Do citizens and officials have the proper tools to offer informed feedback, or even to engage in discussion about some tweak to the FAR or parking requirement? Even highly engaged members of the community may only have the most rudimentary (and possibly misleading) picture of what zoning can and can't do. Elected officials often carry enormous weight with the community in the planning and development process, but they may also have serious misconceptions about what zoning is and what it can and can't do. Developers may regularly submit plans without the proper information, may repeatedly misinterpret some line of code, or may only be familiar with the code pertaining to a single district.

In an ideal world, these audiences would offer their vision for how the community should look and function in the comprehensive planning process. They would not be expected to weigh in on the specifics of the zoning code or map. Instead, the planners would become technicians, turning the vision of the community into a reality through some change to the parking requirement, commercial setbacks, or landscaping regulations. The community would be pleased to see the transformation of their vision into text and lines on the map. The reality, as always, is far messier. As a bulwark against the community pushback that arises out of confusion—rather than genuine disagreement—a short presentation, meeting, or forum on the very basics of zoning and



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➡ Stakeholders may have specific questions about how zoning relates to their homes and businesses. Come prepared to discuss this.

your local code and maps can be an extraordinarily useful primer for residents, elected officials, developers, or other city staff.

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT FOR A ZONING 101 PRESENTATION?

Before putting together a Zoning 101 presentation, take some time to think about the context. At what stage of the planning process is it? Is it a part of the traditional planning process at all? After all, this may be a stand-alone meeting with a civic group, the first step in a visioning process, or may even come just in advance of explicit zoning recommendations from your planning office. The following are a series of possible scenarios for a Zoning 101 discussion, and how your approach might differ.

The Stand-Alone Neighborhood Meeting

You may decide that talking to your community about zoning independent of any project, plan, or proposal may be helpful. Typically, a stand-alone meeting will allow more time for presentation and discussion than other Zoning 101 scenarios, making it easier to cover a wide range of topics. And holding the meeting at a community center, branch library, or other neighborhood gathering spot may be ideal for civic groups, neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce, or community boards. They may have participated in earlier planning exercises, either as representatives of their group or as private citizens, but perhaps never fully grasped what exactly zoning is and how it is used in planning. In some cases, these

organizations may even repeatedly push back on your office's proposals. If you believe this push back comes from a point of confusion about zoning, then scheduling a stand-alone meeting with these organizations may be of help.

A one- or two-hour session can feature discussion on why zoning exists, the range of zoning districts in your town, a brief, jargon-free description (this is particularly important, as it is possibly the source of community confusion) of what is possible in those districts, and an overview of your local zoning map. Stakeholders in a specific neighborhood may be more interested in how zoning affects them personally rather than its impact communitywide. Providing local context in your presentation or discussion will be vital in both retaining your audience's attention and giving them actionable information. Obviously

a traditional presentation may be useful, but you should also consider preparing colorful handouts clearly illustrating the zoning map, what can be built in certain districts, and what the development process looks like. Be prepared to clearly answer specific questions about specific zoning districts, as attendees might be curious about where they are on the map and what this means for them.

At a Forum for a New Planning Initiative

The first forum announcing a new planning initiative may be crucial in establishing a baseline for your community. Whether this is a city-wide forum with a diverse set of stakeholders, or a "traveling roadshow" to various neighborhood groups and organizations, discussing zoning at this early stage can help educate the audience on some basic terminology and offer clear explanations of what is currently possible. Taking this step may ease complications in later stages of the planning process where you discuss changes. With enough time, you may be able to take a similar approach to the stand-alone meeting. This might include walking your community through the local zoning districts and where they are on a clear, colorful, and well-defined map. If your planning process will have an advisory group or council, this step is extraordinarily important. It is likely that members of this advisory group may have vastly different understandings of zoning. A transportation advocate may have little to no experience considering FAR. A housing association representative may have a very clear picture of her zoning district, but may be confused about mixed use building requirements in a commercial district. A chamber of commerce spokesperson might understand the value of increasing height limits, but



Joseph DeAngelis

➡ Sharing your Zoning 101 presentation with a community advisory committee at the start of a new planning initiative can help to ensure that all members are on the same page.

may be utterly lost on why a reduction in the parking requirements can be an incentive to development in downtowns. Here we can see the value in establishing a minimum baseline for your community to clear up early misconceptions and ensure that all participants are on the same page at the very beginning of the planning process.

In Advance of Zoning Recommendations

You may find yourself nearer the end of a planning process rather than the beginning. It's not too late! A basic primer even at this stage may be valuable, especially if it is fresh on the minds of a community now tasked with weighing in on some tweak to lot coverage or setbacks. Take some time to consider the composition of your audience and the thoughts they have expressed through the planning process. It is possible some participants have been active throughout the process, while others may only be in attendance because changes are imminent. Are there specific elements related to zoning and land use that you think need a more thorough explanation? How can you catch up the new folks in the room so they can give informed feedback?

Of course, it is already standard practice to describe the current zoning before putting forward a change. Establishing the existing condition may be considered a pro forma step before giving your recommendations, but pay special attention to how well you are describing the current zoning code and map. Simply stating the various elements that comprise the current zoning district and then what you are proposing to change is not enough. This offers

no context to the attendee, especially those new to the process. To a person who does not know what a floor area ratio is, proposing a change from 0.5 to 0.6 is rather meaningless. Instead, give your recommendations some context by spending a few minutes discussing your zoning map, with a special focus on the district where you are proposing change, and simple diagrams and colorful maps outlining the current and proposed conditions. Give your existing zoning condition as much context, color, and jargon-free attention as your proposed scenario. As this presentation *will* (and should) discuss the changes in detail, foundational understanding of what you are changing is crucial. You probably don't have a lot of time, so it's important to make what time you have count.

WHO IS YOUR AUDIENCE?

In the previous section we discussed how the context for your presentation matters, and we touched on how the composition of an advisory group may inform the content of the presentation. Tailoring your discussion to the given audience is crucial. Developers, architects, elected officials, the involved public, and the wider public are all different audiences with vastly different levels of understanding of zoning and land use. To complicate the matter, in many public forums, representatives of these groups are all likely to be in attendance. Still, there are opportunities to tailor the content of a Zoning 101 presentation to the needs of the audience. The examples below highlight some potential audience-specific needs and challenges that might influence how you develop

your presentation to best inform stakeholders in your community.

The Public

You might be familiar with two groups of community members that comprise "the public." First, there is the wider public. They may be members of the community who don't often attend community meetings or forums, and are generally less involved in the community planning process. Alternatively, we also have the "involved public." These are those highly active participants who regularly attend meetings, may already have a relationship with your planning office, and have weighed in before on zoning discussions.

It is likely these groups are mixed at a community forum or public meeting. It is also likely that members of the wider public may have little understanding of zoning, and the involved public may be chronically confused about elements of the code or map.

This is a fantastic opportunity to reestablish a baseline of zoning knowledge, and ensure that participants are on the same page. Again, illustrative examples of your zoning districts, simple maps, and vastly reduced jargon will be extraordinarily helpful in this case.

Elected Officials

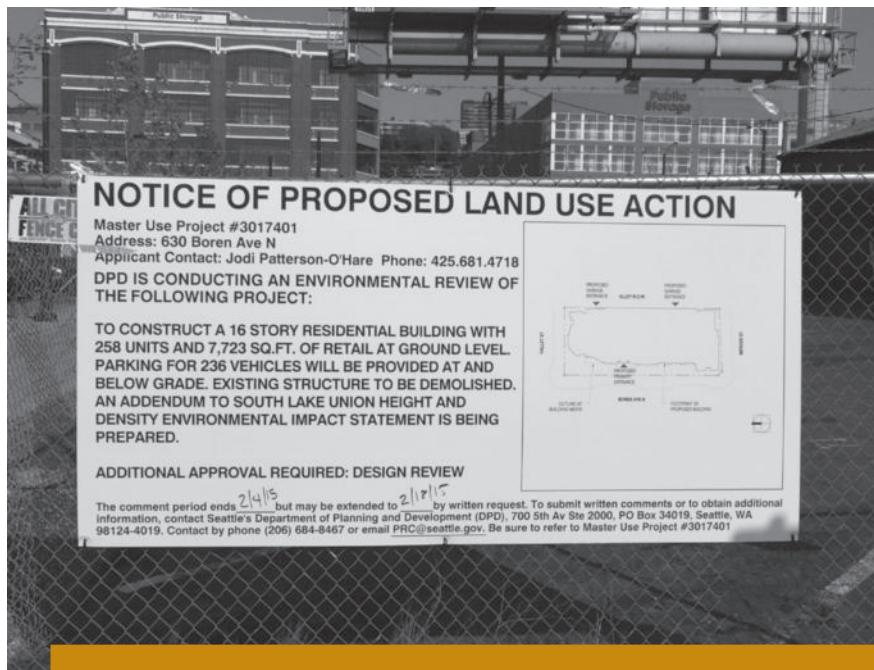
Your office may find it helpful (or necessary) to discuss zoning with your local elected officials. Whether happens as an independent informational meeting or in advance of a presentation to a council or commission, it is likely that elected officials, like the public, will have a widely varying understanding of zoning. A mayor may have a broad understanding of the city as a whole, while a council member may have an idea of the appropriate density for their district with little knowledge of what the zoning actually permits.

Consider also what elected officials in your city may want to learn more about. Do they have a general understanding of the city map, but would like a better picture of the development process to better answer questions in the community? Then perhaps a walk-through of the development review process may be useful. Elected officials will often be the first to field a question or concern from the public on questions of zoning, land use, or development.

Therefore, arming them with a basic understanding of the code and the map is crucial.



Consider your audience when presenting at a public meeting. Some residents may be far more informed about zoning than others.



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Recent development may spur questions of city staff unfamiliar with zoning. Educating administrators in your city may be helpful.

The Development Community

Developers and architects are likely to have a clearer understanding of the code, map, and development process than other stakeholders in your community. And for good reason—their business depends upon it. Still, chronic misunderstandings may repeatedly manifest in yet another set of misfiled plans, another month of delays due to missed steps in the plan review process, or another missing piece of information. Rather than a more general presentation you may give to members of the public or local elected officials, you may want to highlight or mentally note those areas where confusion most often tends to manifest. A presentation based primarily around these topics is apt to be useful for you and the developer or architect.

City Staff and Administrators

Zoning confusion doesn't spare your colleagues or other city administrators. The last contact your local transportation planner may have had with zoning may have been years earlier in planning school. The fire chief may understand her role in the development review process, but might have only the barest understanding of the local zoning map. Ensuring your colleagues have a working knowledge of the map, the districts in your city, and what

the development process looks like is vital. This is especially true if they are in regular contact with the public or regularly present at community meetings. The public may not distinguish between a building inspector, your land-use director, or an environmental planner. Cut down on misinformation and educate your colleagues in city government by developing a Zoning 101 presentation or course that is most pertinent to their role.

WHAT IS THE FORMAT?

Now that you have considered the context and the audience, think about the format and the content. What will you present? The code? The map? Your city's plan review and approval process? Will you be talking about zoning more conceptually?

At the outset, remember your ultimate goal: empowering your audience with the necessary tools and knowledge of zoning, land use, and the development process to offer informed feedback. This will require rational organization, simplifying concepts (aided heavily by visuals), and reducing or eliminating jargon. Planners interested in reducing jargon are highly encouraged to reference the January 2015 issue of *Zoning Practice*, "Zoning Codes in Plain English" (Noble 2015). One of the primary barriers to zoning for those who

aren't planners is the "legalese" that makes up many zoning codes. This language often finds its way into presentations and discussions with the community or elected officials, leading to either more questions or looks of blank confusion. Planners may be seen as hiding behind overly complicated text. Avoid this fate by taking the time to prepare clear, plain English explanations in your Zoning 101 presentation.

Organizing Your Presentation

An hour-long workshop for a civic organization will be quite different from a roundtable Q&A with a group of local developers. Yet both may require similar information. Therefore, you may find it useful to draw up a standard presentation that can be used for a number of different circumstances. Slides should be modular, allowing for sections to be easily removed or reorganized based on the needs of a specific audience.

I suggest an order that starts with an explanation of the concept of zoning and proceeds through your local zoning code and districts, the zoning map, and finally the development process.

Part 1: What Is Zoning?

We don't want to scare people off from the very first slide, but it is unavoidable that conceptually, zoning can be complicated.

Try to strip away as much of the excess baggage that has (often inevitably) glommed onto zoning over the years.

Feel free to begin from your municipality's definition of zoning, which you can usually find in the Planning and Development section of your city's website. But also consider paring that definition down and focusing explicitly on what zoning looks like in your community.

For instance, this definition of zoning from Cornell University's Legal Information Institute is relatively succinct, but might be a bit too legalistic for your audience:

(Zoning is a . . .) legislative act dividing a jurisdiction's land into sections and regulating different land uses in each section in accordance with a zoning ordinance.

Here, from New York City's Department of City Planning, we have a more naturalistic explanation of the purpose of zoning and how it may impact people's lives:



Single-Family Detached Residences											
R2'	Lot Width (min)	Lot Area (min)	FAR (max)	OSR (percent)	Front Yard (min)	Rear Yard (min)	Side Yards (min)			Building Height (max)	Required Parking (min)
							#	Total	Each		
	40 ft	3,800 sf	0.5	150.0	15 ft	30 ft	2	13 ft	5 ft	na²	1 per dwelling unit

¹ Regulations may differ in Lower Density Growth Management Areas

² Height controlled by sky exposure plane, a sloping line that begins at a height of 25 feet above front yard line

New York City Department of City Planning

➔ New York's *Zoning Handbook* broadly outlines what can be built in each zoning district, along with simple graphics illustrating bulk, setbacks, and parking.

Zoning is the language of the physical city. It aims to promote an orderly pattern of development and to separate incompatible land uses, such as industrial uses and homes, to ensure a pleasant environment.

Illustrate your definition with a graphic, drawing, or map to give the reader context. Try to do this for all foundational concepts you might be presenting up front.

Part 2: The Zoning Code and Zoning Districts

It will likely be useful to order your city's zoning districts as they are presented in the zoning code. However, if you find your code's layout to be unintuitive, consider ordering by the intensity of use, starting with your residential zoning districts. Be sure to use to use basic diagrams illustrating what is permitted in each district. Consider developing these diagrams if you don't already have them (SketchUp is a free and useful tool for this) or scour the

Internet for good illustrative examples. For example, the New York City Department of City Planning publishes the extraordinarily helpful *Zoning Handbook*, which marries simple axonometric drawings with photographs of conforming buildings and clear explanations of the district (2016). I have used this handbook as a model for basic Zoning 101 discussions with communities in Staten Island, New York. There are clear benefits in having archetypal "blank" buildings to illustrate zoning.

Organize your presentation so that attendees can clearly see the differences between districts as you progress through the presentation. This visual contrast will be helpful for your audience, and will help to contextualize your zoning map. This is why ordering your presentation by intensity of use is beneficial. Your audience should be able to clearly see the progression of building type, size, and form as you progress from a low-intensity rural or suburban residential district

to a higher-intensity neighborhood or urban center district.

Part 3: The Zoning Map

Presenting your zoning map again offers the community a chance to put the zoning districts in context. You may want to use your existing zoning map for this portion, though I would caution against it if your local map is laden with lots of text, an endless series of crisscrossing black lines, and little if any color. If this is the case, opt for a radical simplification that relies on color, heavily weighted lines to divide districts, and a clear labeling scheme. This is not a replacement for your zoning map. Instead, it is a clear and simple representation of it in broad strokes. There are a number of tools that can be used to develop a map of this sort. ArcMap or other GIS applications may be most useful at the outset, especially if you already have zoning map data. Alternatively, the Adobe Suite of graphics applications (Illustrator especially) might be useful to either clean up maps created in ArcMap, or to draw directly on an existing orthophotography. There are also free tools built directly into Google Maps that allow you to create your own basic, color coded and labeled maps that I have found useful.

Take special care when noting zoning overlays and subdistricts. Adding them all from the very beginning has the potential to clutter your map with (to the layperson) arcane rules governing downtown districts and special environmental overlay areas. You can introduce these later, but ensure from the beginning that your audience is getting as clear a vision as possible of the base-level map.

Part 4: The Land-Use Review and Development Process

It will be useful to walk your audience through a basic representation of the land-use review and development process. A clear picture of how things get built in your city will be extremely helpful to residents who may have little idea about the layers of approval, negotiation, and review that make up the development process. In many cities this flowchart can get enormously complicated. As with our look at the zoning code and map, our goal is not the most precise representation possible of the process, but instead a broad-brush representation that allows the community to give informed feedback. Try not to pack your slide with an endless series of recursive ar-

rows, shapes, and diagrams. Ensure that your process *progresses* in a clear direction. Note departments and agencies clearly so that your audience knows who is responsible at a given stage in the development process.

GENERAL CONCEPTS TO REMEMBER

If you find yourself stuck or straying too far into the esoteric world of zoning and land-use planning, here are a few key takeaways to help you refocus on your goal.

Use Visuals

Visuals and graphics should be used to illustrate and contextualize pieces of text. For existing graphics (such as a zoning map) try to simplify them as much as possible. Use color and clear lines.

Rely on Plain English

Avoid using complicated phrasing, sentences, or jargon straight from the zoning code. Translate this information for your audience.

Use Existing Resources

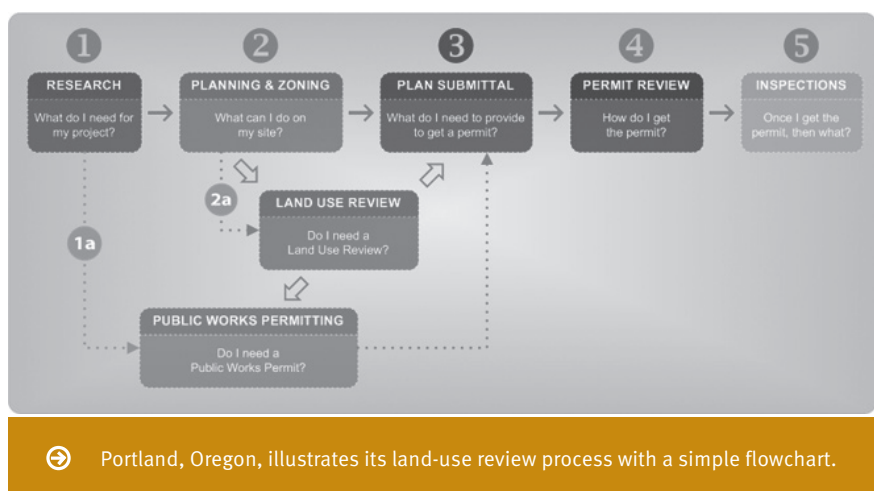
Rely on photographs, existing definitions, and statements of purpose (such as those on your city's website), or books you may still have from planning school. Scour the web for suitable illustrations, graphics, and explanations.

Tailor Your Message to Your Audience

Add or remove content based upon your audience. Develop your presentation for a general audience, but use your professional judgment to tailor this information for a room of developers, a sit-down with a council member, or a presentation to a local housing association.

CONCLUSION

A good Zoning 101 presentation can be deployed in a variety of venues and audiences. It can be tacked onto an existing presentation to prime an audience before discussing a new zoning proposal, or can become a stand-alone session with interested community groups. It can become a series of printouts, a section on your community's website, or compiled as a published handbook. It can help elected officials and city staff to accurately discuss issues of zoning and land use with the public. Most importantly, it can demystify a complex and often esoteric process. Zoning 101 can help to narrow the knowledge gap between a city and its citizens, and equip them with the tools and the confidence to make informed decisions.



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Joseph DeAngelis is a planner and researcher with the American Planning Association in Chicago. Previously, he was a resiliency planner for the New York City Department of City Planning, where he worked on long-term planning and zoning solutions for communities impacted by Hurricane Sandy.

Cover: A New Zoning Plan for the District of Columbia. Harold M. Lewis, 1956.

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ZONING?

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