

ZONING PRACTICE

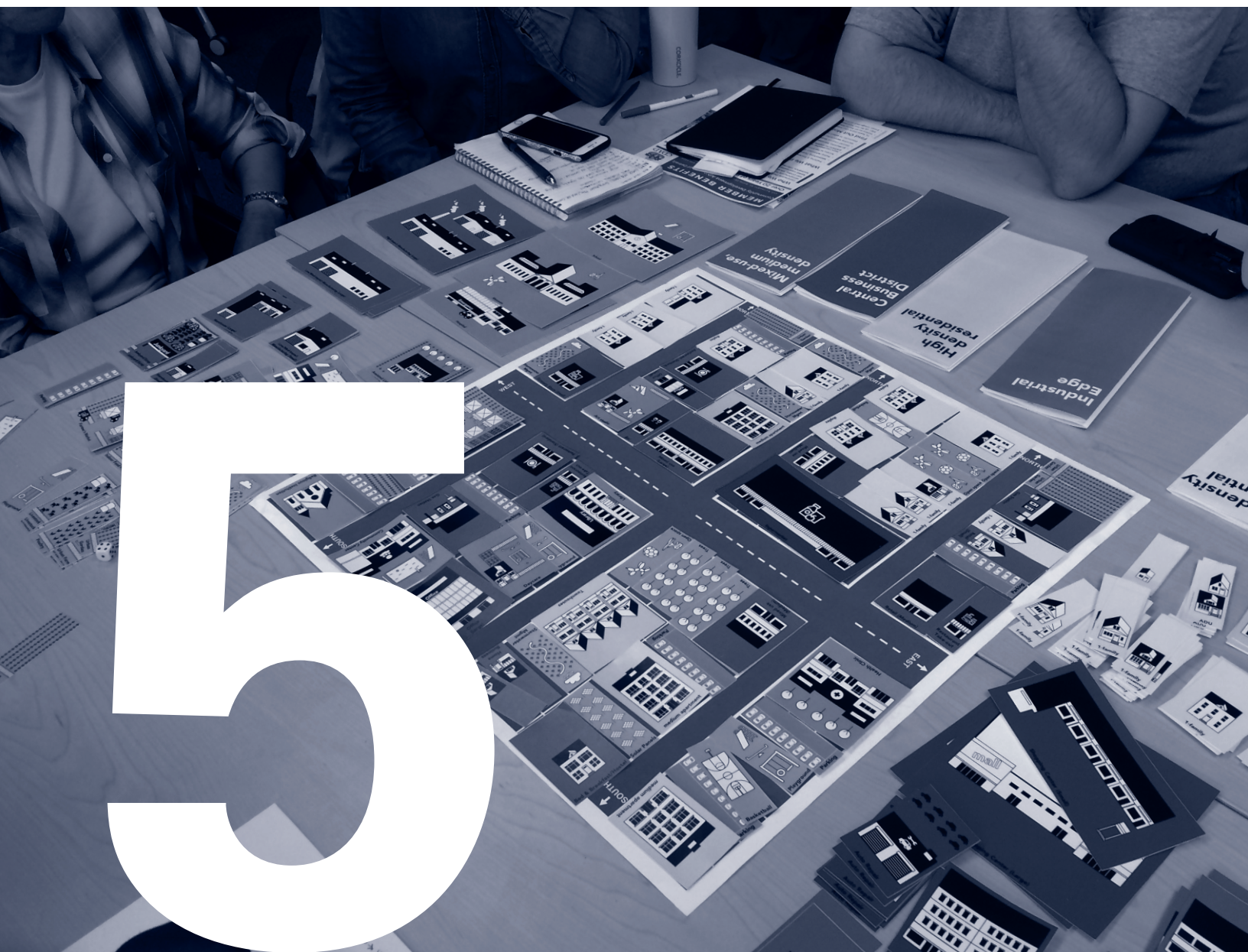
MAY 2021



AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

➡ ISSUE NUMBER 5

PRACTICE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Game of Zones

By Colin Scarff, Andrew Wald, and Kimani Jeffrey

The call for more meaningful dialogue between cities and citizens is now louder than ever. Of course, the demand “Nothing about us, without us” has been around for a long time, yet the history of urban planning is littered with examples of top-down planning decisions made without (or in spite of) input from the communities that were most directly affected. Today—if recent urban planning and design RFPs are any indication—planners in both government and the private sector are increasingly highlighting community engagement beyond the customary public presentation as an indispensable part of any project scope. It is especially encouraging to see a renewed commitment to including communities that have historically been marginalized and excluded from conversations that affect urban planning and changes to the built environment. But what tools are available to ensure that these conversations are meaningful and productive for everyone involved? And what tools can help bring new voices to the conversation that would otherwise have gone unheard? This article will focus on one innovative tool the City of Detroit has been using to make urban planning more accessible, participatory, and fun, and highlight an overall approach that can help other communities seeking to engage more meaningfully on the topic of zoning and land use.

ZONING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In 2019, the Detroit City Planning Commission (CPC), led by Director Marcell Todd Jr., launched ZoneDetroit, a multi-year process to update its zoning ordinance. Detroit has changed a lot since its last comprehensive zoning ordinance update. The CPC determined that a zoning ordinance that can deal more effectively and efficiently with the opportunities and challenges facing a modern American city was necessary. In recent years, Detroit has experienced a resurgence of development in its Downtown and Midtown areas. Older auto-oriented corridors needed enhanced standards that support

local businesses, encourage redevelopment, and better manage uses that detract from the corridors’ character. The city’s industrial areas needed standards that address current development trends, encourage reuse of vacant space, and transition appropriately into residential areas. Traditional single-family residential neighborhoods needed new standards that promote neighborhood stability while creating new opportunities for housing diversity, affordability, and density. Finally, the updated zoning ordinance needed to consider the diverse range of alternative uses that have flourished in Detroit’s neighborhoods, like urban agriculture and the creative repurposing of vacant houses and lots.

Successful zoning regulations reflect the aspirations of the whole community. Communities must be holistically included in efforts to update local zoning codes and maps to ensure that their values and preferences are reflected in the finished product. This can be easier said than done. First, there is the challenge of reach. Youth, working adults, and residents with limited mobility or in neighborhoods far from typical meeting places often can’t make it to public meetings. Other people may choose not to participate out of a lack of interest or sense of connection to the topic. Digital literacy and access to the Internet and email can also be a marginalizing factor, especially in low-income communities and among the elderly. Language is another important challenge to overcome—Detroit has large Arabic, Spanish, and Bengali-speaking communities, as well as smaller communities speaking Polish, Hmong, and other languages. Active engagement of these often-missed populations in every phase of an outreach process is essential to gain a full picture of their needs and vision for future.

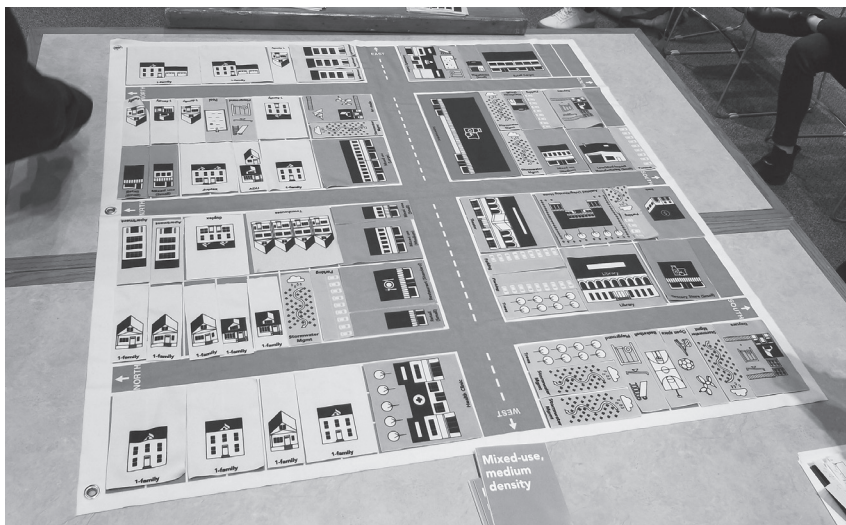
Establishing productive dialogue about planning concepts like zoning and land use can also be a challenge. Even seasoned experts can have difficulty visualizing or articulating the potential consequences and

trade-offs. Holding nuanced and productive conversations can get even trickier when participants are not experts and come to the table with different types of knowledge, expertise, and backgrounds—not to mention differences in language, communication style, and comfort levels acting in group settings. A typical neighborhood planning workshop may include a spectrum of attendees, from planning professionals to people who are learning planning concepts for the first time. How can workshop facilitators ensure that everybody can participate in the conversation and express their ideas equally and on a level playing field?

When the ZoneDetroit project was launched, CPC staff were looking for more effective ways to engage communities on various zoning issues, based on their experience engaging with communities over the years. They knew that Detroiters had become burnt-out on the traditional auditorium-style town hall meeting. They also knew that some community members were often dissatisfied with the usual hearing process, in which community members were afforded limited opportunities to comment on important policy matters prior to the official vote. At the outset of ZoneDetroit, there was a realization among CPC staff and community members that much deeper engagement using new tools would be necessary.

With these challenges in mind, the CPC staff decided to change its typical approach to community engagement. The new approach would be focused on making zoning more understandable and relatable to as many people as possible. But how could they make conversations about zoning interactive, fun, and engaging? How could they make zoning understandable to people and their everyday lives? How could they get both young and older people interested and involved?

The idea was simple: let’s try a game! Games and hands-on activities are ideal ways to educate people about new concepts. Physical, tactile games can help structure



Detroit CPC

➡ Game of Zones has a square board representing a neighborhood. A “main street” runs down the center of the board, intersected by three smaller side streets, to create eight city blocks. Blocks are divided into empty parcels, each with the same size. There are 114 total parcels on a standard board.

and concretize conversations about abstract topics. And, if designed with flexibility in mind, games can serve as tools for open-ended exploration and experimentation. And so, CPC staff, Code Studio, and Interboro Partners created Game of Zones: an interactive board game created to engage the public in the zoning process in a collaborative and constructive format. Game of Zones was born from a desire to empower people across Detroit to contribute their ideas to the project, regardless of their prior knowledge of zoning. The game invites the public to learn how zoning can shape their community and allows participants to develop and present their own ideas for rezoning an imaginary neighborhood while connecting and collaborating with other members of the community.

WHAT IS GAME OF ZONES?

Interboro Partners designed the Game of Zones activity set to be a simple and flexible tool, able to be used at a variety of events, from large public events to small meetings with block clubs and community development corporations to sessions for high school students. The basic action of

Game of Zones is to place “development” or land-use tiles onto a blank game board in order to create a neighborhood. When played with a group, the primary goal is to come to a consensus about what kinds of uses are (or aren’t) appropriate for the neighborhood, where in the neighborhood each use belongs, and at what scales and densities. Over a period of several weeks, Interboro created different material versions of the Game of Zones—including simple paper sets, a deluxe version with plastic pieces and a felt board, and a jumbo static-cling version for displaying on walls. Each of these variations includes two essentials: a board and a large set of development tiles. Additional features, like a set of zoning scenarios and zoning overlays, were added for more in-depth sessions. And, of course, Game of Zones also comes with a set of instructions, a zoning district color key, and discussion questions for the activity facilitator.

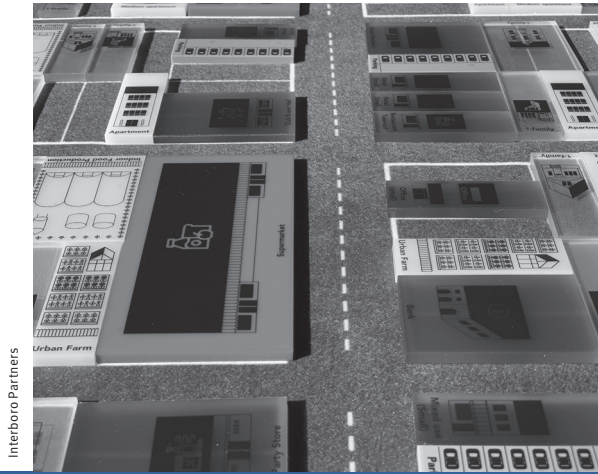
Basic Gameplay

Game of Zones has a square board representing a neighborhood. A “main street” runs down the center of the board, intersected by

three smaller side streets, to create eight city blocks. Blocks are divided into empty parcels, each with the same size. There are 114 total parcels on a standard board, though multiple boards can be placed side-by-side to create a larger neighborhood.

The most distinctive part of Game of Zones is its set of colorful, illustrated development tiles. A standard set includes hundreds of tiles representing 67 unique land uses and densities. Land uses range from single-family homes to high-rise apartments, supermarkets to marijuana dispensaries, community gardens to office buildings, and junkyards to art institutes. The set of tiles was designed to include uses and building types that are already familiar in Detroit (whether desirable or not), as well as uses that currently don’t exist, but *could* with updates to the zoning ordinance (like accessory dwelling units or urban livestock). Each tile has a simple illustration representing its specific use (e.g., house, hotel, museum), as well as a base color representing its broader land-use category (e.g., low-density residential, dense commercial, institutional). The size of the tiles matters too—each tile is scaled to fit within the parcel lines on the game board. A small single-family house, garden, or corner store tile covers a single parcel; duplex, urban farm, or car dealership tiles cover two or more parcels; and a few uses, like schools, shopping centers, or large factories can cover most of a block.

The basic Game of Zones action is simple: each player takes turns placing land-use tiles on the board, with the goal of creating their ideal neighborhood. The first round is conducted as if zoning did not exist at all—players place whatever land-use tile they want, wherever they feel it is appropriate. If another player objects to the type or placement of a particular tile, group discussion and consensus-building is encouraged; however, in this round, the person placing the tile ultimately has the final say whether to acquiesce to the NIMBY demands, attempt a compromise, or place their chosen tile anyway. When the board is filled with tiles, the round ends and the players and facilitator discuss how their neighborhood turned



➡ Different material versions of the Game of Zones were created—from simple paper sets to a deluxe acrylic version to a jumbo felt-cling version.

out. Why did the neighborhood turn out like this? Did any patterns emerge? Are there any conflicts or incompatible neighbors on the board—and how could that be fixed? Does this neighborhood provide enough housing? jobs? amenities? parking? Does this neighborhood look like one that could work in real life? And is this neighborhood a place where you would want to live?

Gameplay Variations

A set of five zoning precedent pamphlets are included with Game of Zones sets in order to introduce the concept of a predetermined zoning map and apply real-world examples. These fold-out pamphlets contain sample board configurations based on common zoning scenarios: a central business district zoned entirely for high-density commercial uses, an all low-density residential neighborhood, a high-density residential neighborhood, an “industrial edge” with residential adjacent to industrial uses, and a mixed-use, mixed-density neighborhood. Each pamphlet displays a color-coded Game of Zones board to serve as the base zoning map, followed by three examples of how Game of Zones tiles could be placed to create very different neighborhoods based on the same zoning. These examples are matched

to familiar real-world neighborhoods that reflect that particular type of zoning and development style. In this variation, Game of Zones participants are invited to select one precedent and, once again, try to build their ideal neighborhood—this time, following the zoning rules prescribed by the map. In the discussion, players are encouraged to consider how the zoning map affected the neighborhood they were able to build. Did the new zoning limit development in any way? Are there any advantages to zon-

ing a neighborhood like this? How might you change the zoning rules in order to build a more desirable neighborhood?

After early sessions of playing the Game of Zones with community groups and listening to participant feedback, CPC staff developed a new way to apply the zoning map. Later versions of the Game of Zones included a set of transparent zoning maps which could be laid on top of the players’ original un-zoned “dream neighborhood.” Based on players’ reactions during the dramatic zoning reveal, this was a fun and exciting twist in the game—the players would scramble to identify which uses in their neighborhood were compatible with the new zoning map and which ones weren’t. Any “non-conforming” uses would have to be removed from the board and replaced with a different use that was allowed. This often set off a chain reaction of redevelopment. For example, players might discover that a quiet residential community now neighbors an industrial zone that has just been cleared for a large factory; players would react to the new factory by rearranging the entire board to achieve more desirable adjacencies. Players quickly learned how zoning is a powerful tool for determining what is or isn’t allowed in a neighborhood.

Facilitation

Throughout the game, CPC staff acted as facilitators. Rather than try to steer players toward particular end goals that the city felt was appropriate, facilitators allowed participants to plan out whatever dream community they desired. One of the facilitators’ main roles was to keep spurring the conversation by asking questions about why a player chose to place a particular tile or making observations about trends and patterns unfolding on the board. The facilitators’ other important role was simply to listen. Kimani Jeffrey, CPC’s lead facilitator for Game of Zones (along with colleagues, Christopher Gulock and Jamie Murphy), notes that chances for this type of community engagement are rare—often it is the planners and architects running the session who do most of the talking. Game of Zones was a valuable opportunity to let community members speak openly amongst themselves, giving the city a much clearer understanding of what community members want in their neighborhoods and why.

Ultimately, Game of Zones is a tool to generate discussion. In conventional board games, the point of the game is typically to follow a set of rules in order to achieve a specific objective—namely, to win. However, in Game of Zones, there is no real way to “win” within the game itself; instead, the objective is to create a conversation around the game as a way of distilling community members’ ideas. When that information informs decisions in the city’s ZoneDetroit effort, everyone wins.

OBSERVATIONS

An estimated 200 players have already played Game of Zones at about 17 public meetings, pop-up events, or small group sessions across the city. Throughout these iterations, CPC staff and the Game of Zones team observed a number of interesting things.

Removing Barriers to Entry

Not everyone is fluent in “planner-speak” or is familiar with the latest planning or zoning trends or terminology. Many people have never heard of zoning, and those who

have may not understand how it works or its ramifications in their daily lives. The zoning ordinance itself is long, full of technical jargon and legal language, and lacks clear visuals to help illuminate the rules—at first glance, it just looks difficult. Game of Zones helped reduce the intimidation factor, making a zoning discussion feel less like a brain-racking slog into the weeds and more like a fun learning exercise. With the barriers to entry lowered, Game of Zones made it clear that a great many people—regardless of their education or background—do inherently know good planning principles and have plenty to say about them. When playing Game of Zones, even children and teens with little-to-no prior exposure to zoning or urban planning were able to contribute in meaningful ways to conversations about what makes a development a good or bad fit for a neighborhood and identify what would make an ideal community. Even if a player had a hard time communicating an idea with the group in words, Game of Zones allowed them to simply show everybody what they meant. Game of Zones reduced the barriers of entry to the conversation, allowing community members to discuss the issues that matter most to them, in terms that everybody could follow, without necessarily compromising the quality or complexity of the ideas.

Game of Zones players are not just in the conversation—they are in charge of the conversation. In the game, community members could name and frame the issues and values that are most vital to them, using their own terminology—instead of the professional “experts” shaping the conversation according to their own values and concerns, and using language that does not resonate with community stakeholders. Doing the latter can lead to misunderstandings, misrepresentation, loss of trust in the process, resentment, anger, and ultimately a breakdown in the entire process. Letting stakeholders demonstrate their values in their own way through the framework of Game of Zones encourages participation and reduces the chance that ideas get lost in translation. Once a community’s concerns are clearly put on the table—literally—the conversation can shift to meaningful action.

Thanks to Game of Zones’ fun appearance, simple rules, and entertaining play, children and teens were drawn into conversations about zoning that might not have happened otherwise. Many of the youth that participated in the process were Black and Hispanic. During interactions, the mundane topic of zoning was transformed into an activity that drew ecstatic laughter, enthusiastic feedback, and profound exploration. Engaging young people using the Game of Zones enhances awareness of development patterns in a community. For instance, one 10-year-old noticed that while certain development pieces were placed on the game board, that there was not enough parking to support them. This observation was surprising from someone too young to drive, especially without any prompting or discussion on parking from the adults in the room. Time and time again, CPC staff were amazed at how aware young people are about zoning and urban design issues. While they may not know the planning lexicon, they could certainly pick out good and bad development patterns using Game of Zones. One of the CPC goals that came out of their experience using Game of Zones was to continue

planning outreach with youth in order to connect them to the zoning and governmental process long-term. The Game of Zones team hopes that this tool will spark a continued interest in this field among the youth who participate. If the best teacher is exposure, then exposing Detroit youth to urban planning through Game of Zones may help produce the next generation of homegrown planners and designers who will shape the future of their city.

Game of Zones also opened doors into less-visited neighborhoods. As community advocates around the city heard about the Game of Zones, they became interested in hosting it in their own community. In a time in the city where there is a lot of meeting fatigue because of the high level of development, the Game of Zones was a breath of fresh air.

Reframing Priorities

Participants at public planning meetings sometimes arrive with their minds already made up about a particular set of issues. We observed that Game of Zones often helped to gently break down participants’ preconceived ideas, creating opportunities for them



Detroit CPC



Game of Zones players are not just in the conversation—they are in charge of the conversation. In the game, community members could name and frame the issues and values that are most vital to them, using their own terminology.

to explore alternatives and reframe priorities. For example, one community meeting began with a presentation and group discussion before switching to Game of Zones. During the initial discussion, many community members were adamant that parking was a big issue in their neighborhood and that any new development would require creating additional parking. However, when playing Game of Zones, the people who had been most vocal about their neighborhood parking shortage did not place any parking tiles in their ideal neighborhood. Even when the facilitators pointed out the lack of parking on the board, players refused to switch building tiles for parking lots. One of the strongest advocates for on-site parking during the earlier discussion even started suggesting creative parking alternatives during the game. Also, with all the parking tiles voluntarily left in the discard pile, players no longer felt a need to talk about neighborhood development only in terms of parking—they were free to discuss other things that mattered to them. So, while city facilitators first took note of what community members *said*—parking matters—the facilitators were able to tease out other important ideas by observing what people *did* during the game.

The placement of large job-creating developments in neighborhoods was a common topic of debate that provides another example of how Game of Zones helped to shift deep-seated opinions. Players recognized the importance of zoning as a driver for local job creation and they often placed large developments like hospitals in their neighborhoods, citing job creation as the reason. City facilitators took great interest in that type of in-game behavior because they could recall many real-life instances of the city advocating for a major job-creating development while residents argued against it. The conversations that took place while playing Game of Zones affirmed that people do want job-producing developments, but they may have certain stipulations for where it should be located in the community and what type of use it is. This realization helped facilitators shift the development and jobs conversation away from the “should we do

it?” argument to the more nuanced question of “how might we do it properly?” The city facilitators saw opportunities to reduce future conflicts around new development by using Game of Zones or similar methods to work with a community in the early stages of planning to identify the community’s priorities and preferences. Game of Zones helps community members work alongside planners to cultivate a shared vision, while also thinking creatively to resolve differences and develop solutions.

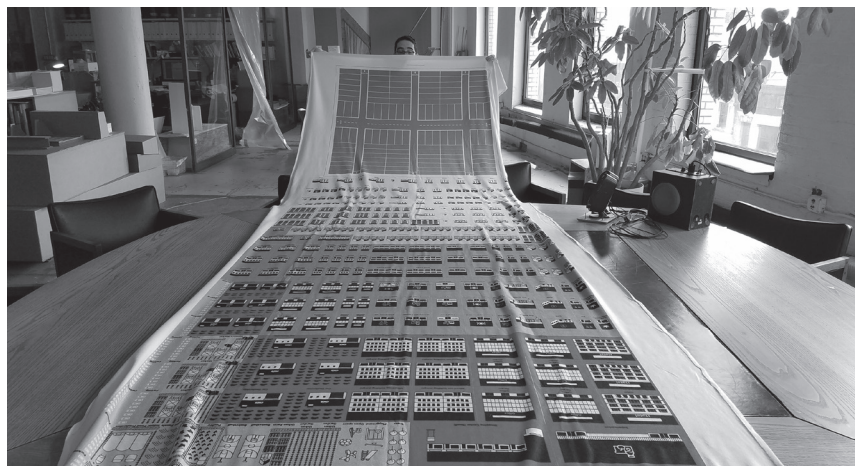
Hacking the Game

Engagement tools often have blind spots or put limits—both intentionally and unintentionally—on how people participate and the types of feedback that can be collected. For example, a poorly-designed questionnaire might prevent people from saying how they really feel, simply by asking the wrong questions or by limiting the range of possible responses. Game of Zones was always meant to be flexible and to elicit open-ended conversation; however, the game’s designers were fascinated to see how some players found ways to bend the rules when even Game of Zones felt too constrained. For example, players began stacking tiles on top of each other to represent new types of mixed-use developments, including

surprising combinations like single-family homes and gardens on the roof of a school. Others placed green infrastructure tiles on top of other development tiles to represent green roofs. Some Game of Zones players started ignoring the parcel boundaries on the board in order to realize their visions—sometimes even building out into streets. By “coloring outside the lines,” players were able to create new types of dense development and incorporate features like alley parking and green streets that were not originally part of the game. Typically, this type of “hacking” started towards the end of the game, once the board was full, conflicts had been identified, and players were discussing how to creatively resolve tricky issues. Players were encouraged to hack and co-opt Game of Zones in order to articulate what mattered most to them, rather than play within constraints set by the designers.

Better Conversations

Getting this wealth of information might prove challenging in a more typical community meeting. People are understandably passionate about what happens in their community. Discussing development concepts in a town hall meeting with a back-and-forth, comment-and-response format may reinforce an adversarial atmosphere if the community



Interboro Partners



Game of Zones is handmade, and lends itself to players hacking and modifying the game to more effectively articulate their values.

opposes the ideas of the city, or one part of a community opposes another cohort. Due to the lack of time and opportunity for everyone to express their personal views, people often become frustrated. Game of Zones made it far easier to communicate and share ideas in a group setting. When people were given the time and means to express themselves in a friendly and collaborative environment, hostility disappeared. Another benefit of Game of Zones is that it remains abstract and hypothetical; when CPC engages citizens, it's typically regarding a real-world development proposal that is already in the works. Using the Game of Zones allowed the CPC to capture the thoughts and intents of a community ahead of the real project. In this way, CPC has been able to understand what a particular community wants before passions are aroused by a real and imminent project. Since Game of Zones highlights real issues but not specific projects, productive and peaceful conversations can be held about values and principles, instead of getting bogged down in the specifics of support or opposition to an individual development.

CONCLUSION

Game of Zones was a valuable experiment that enabled the City of Detroit to reach new audiences and have new types of productive conversations about zoning and planning. So, what is the future of Games of Zones? Will it continue to be used in a post-COVID world? Will it continue to be embraced by neighborhood residents? Will the city continue to use it or a similar platform for future initiatives? Below are just a few possibilities:

- Developing an online/digital version of the game. This would greatly expand the audience, allow people to participate on their own time instead of at scheduled meetings, and could make it easier to record and share results among city staff and game participants. Also, Game of Zones was developed in a pre-COVID world; an online version would be ideal for physically distanced meetings.
- Developing a downloadable DIY-version. This would allow community groups and citizen planners around the city

to print out their own Game of Zones sets and host their own game sessions. People could even start to develop their own variations and expansions that could be shared back with the city and design team!

- Making Game of Zones available to other cities and organizations in cities and communities across the United States.
- Creating expansion packs. New tiles, new boards, and new rule variations can add more complex dimensions to the existing Game of Zones set. For example, add development challenges like making a neighborhood where housing coexists with a large factory or making the most walkable neighborhood possible! Or, adding roleplaying, where players might take on the planning objectives of a resident, a shopkeeper, an industrialist, a child, or even wildlife!

There is significant potential for activities like Game of Zones to change how planners, local agencies, and officials engage with members of the community. Particularly on the subject of zoning—which by turns can both generate heated debate and exclude wide swaths of a community unfamiliar with its complexities—structured and highly interactive activities like Game of Zones can help to even the playing field. This can be particularly useful in cities like Detroit that are attempting to develop a vision that is inclusive of existing residents and is prepared for the future. By engaging directly with residents and stakeholders through a highly accessible, entertaining, enjoyable, and informative activity, Game of Zones can help to make that vision possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colin Scarff is a zoning consultant and principal at Code Studio.

Andrew Wald is a multidisciplinary designer and Director of Interboro Partners' Detroit office.

Kimani Jeffrey is a city planner at the City of Detroit Planning Commission.

Correction: The April issue of *Zoning Practice*, "After the Buyouts: Managing Land in the Floodplain," mistakenly omitted an important piece of context on page 3. In the discussion on post-flood redevelopment in Cedar Rapids in which CDBG-DR funds were used for land acquisition and clearance, it should be noted that both redevelopment and accompanying structural mitigations occurred prior to the adoption of current, more restrictive CDBG-DR rules. This additional information has been added to the online PDF of the issue. The editors regret the error, and thank the author for making us aware of our omission of this important piece of context.

Cover: Detroit CPC

VOL. 38, NO. 5

The American Planning Association will lead the way to equitable, thriving communities by creating unique insights, as well as innovative and practical approaches that enable the planning community to anticipate and successfully adapt to the needs of a rapidly changing world.

Zoning Practice (ISSN 1548-0135) is a monthly publication of the American Planning Association. Joel Albizo, FASAE, CAE, Chief Executive Officer; Petra Hurtado, PhD, Research Director; Joseph DeAngelis, AICP, and David Morley, AICP, Editors.

Subscriptions are available for \$95 (U.S.) and \$120 (foreign). Missing and damaged print issues: Contact APA Customer Service (312-431-9100 or subscriptions@planning.org) within 90 days of the publication date.

©2021 by the American Planning Association, 205 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200, Chicago, IL 60601-5927; planning.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means without permission in writing from APA.

Printed on recycled paper, including 50-70% recycled fiber and 10% postconsumer waste.



American Planning Association

Creating Great Communities for All

ZONING PRACTICE

AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

205 N. Michigan Ave.

Suite 1200

Chicago, IL 60601-5927



HOW CAN YOUR COMMUNITY MAKE ZONING MORE ACCESSIBLE?

5