

# “Cities Start to Question an American Ideal: A House With a Yard on Every Lot”

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<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/18/upshot/cities-across-america-question-single-family-zoning.html>

Main insights

1.  
Prevalence of  
single-family zoning  
in the US  
+ its legacy on  
communities

At present, **75% of residential land in the US are zoned** exclusively for detached single-family homes.

Segregation by housing type is intertwined with **segregation by income**. Reversing single-family zoning is thus motivated by social justice considerations such as poverty alleviation and improved economic prospects of marginalised social groups.

2.  
Reversing the trend  
of single-family  
zoning is far from  
being a simple  
process

Removing single-family zoning requires **significant political will on the part of local elected leaders**, as demonstrated by the 12–1 vote in the Minneapolis City Council to end single-family zoning despite having 20,000 residents expressing their opposition to the plans.

The politics of zoning is complicated by **competing interests**—the desire for density (for jobs accessibility and agglomeration effects) and the desire for sprawl (for increased living spaces)—which are seldom reconcilable.

3.  
The alternatives to  
single-family zoning  
are not new

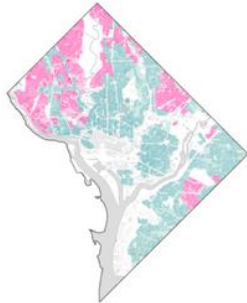
Allowing for different housing densities within  
neighbourhoods is not a new concept—in fact, **there has long  
been a mixture of housing types in many cities in the US**  
before single-family zoning gained popularity among planners.

Visuals

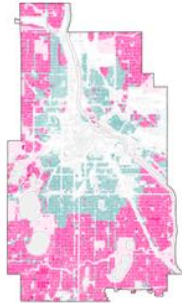
Residential land zoned for: ■ detached single-family homes ■ other housing



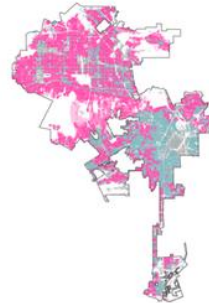
New York **15%**



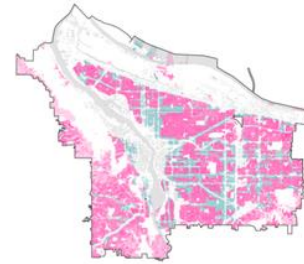
Washington **36%**



Minneapolis **70%**



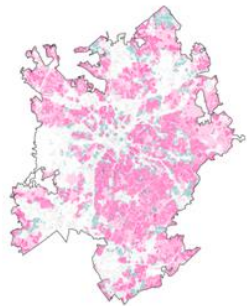
Los Angeles **75%**



Portland, Ore. **77%**



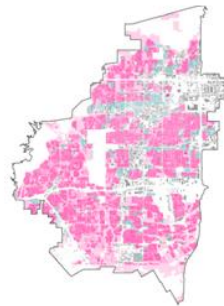
Seattle **81%**



Charlotte, N.C. **84%**



Sandy Springs, Ga. **85%**



Arlington, Tex. **89%**



San Jose, Calif. **94%**

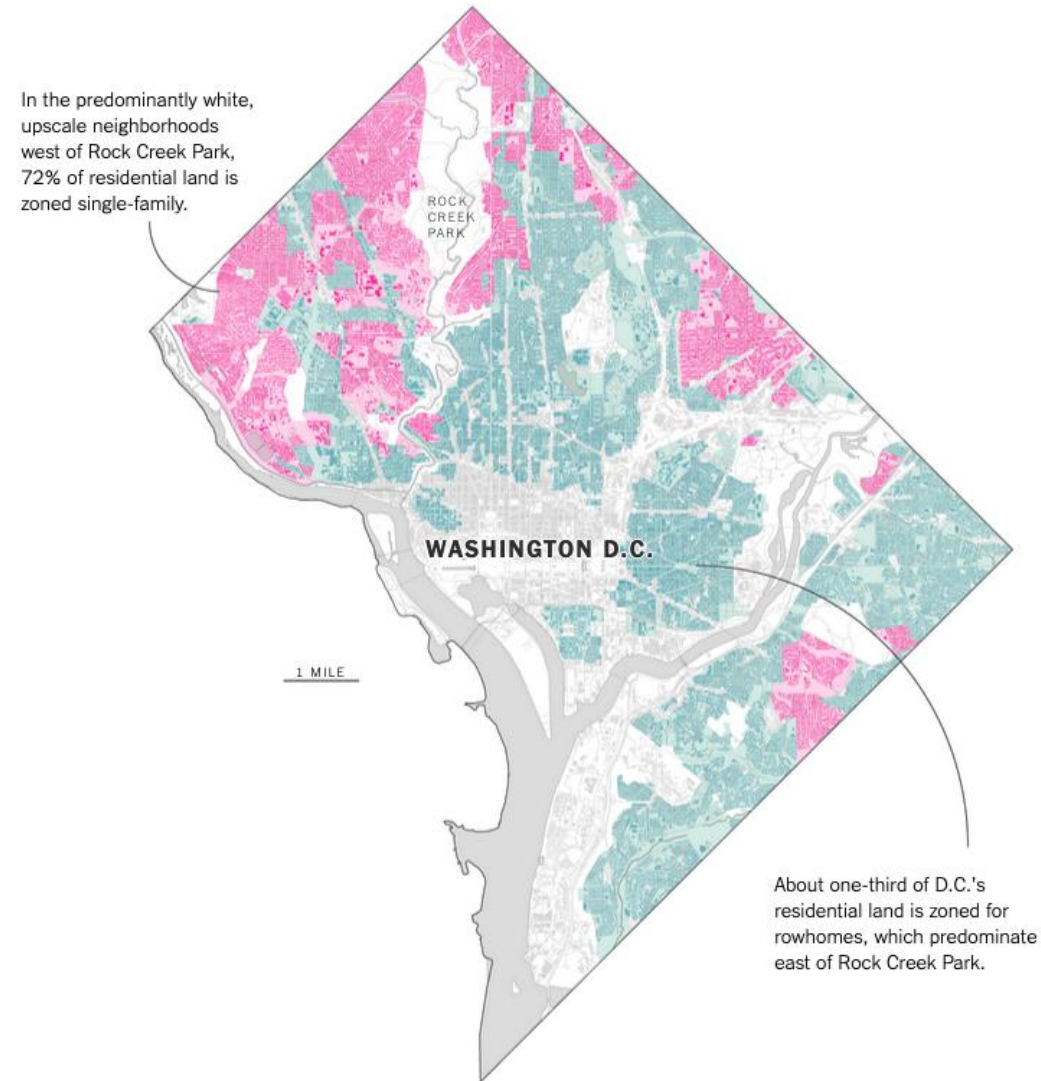
Small-multiples map in the introduction section

Shows the extent of single-family zoning in different cities

Cities not shown to scale. Source: Zoning data for individual cities from UrbanFootprint

## Washington, D.C.

36% of residential land is zoned for detached single-family homes



Exhibits of individual cities

Illustrates the spatial patterns of single-family zoning within cities



Context & background

## Describing the practice of single-family zoning

The authors first introduce the practice of single-family zoning in the US—how it has been used by local communities as an instrument to **preserve the low-density characteristic of their neighbourhoods**.

This sets up the context for the **recent trend** of state governments (such as those in Oregon and California) legislating the end of single-family zoning and politicians (such as Elizabeth Warren) voicing their opposition to the practice.

## Arguments for & against

The authors then set out common justifications for preserving / abolishing single-family zoning.

Critics of single-family zoning argue that it **exacerbates housing unaffordability** in cities, reinforce racial inequality and are environmentally unsustainable.

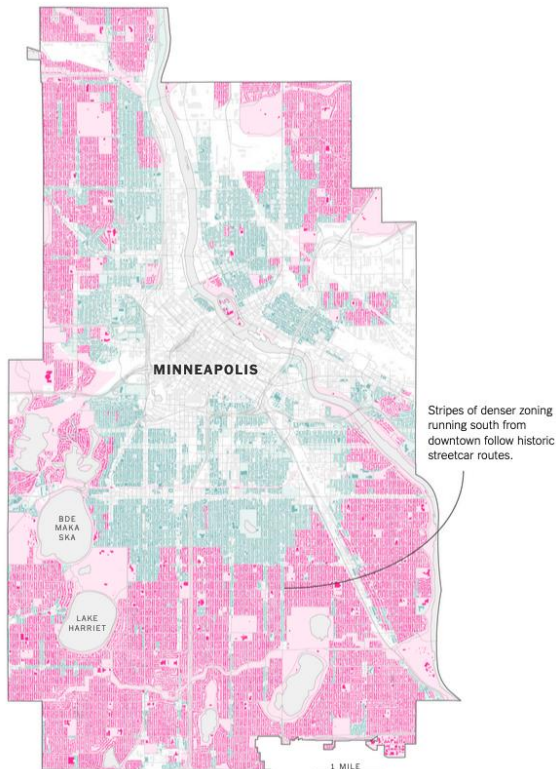
Proponents of single-family zoning—include current homeowners who benefit from its effects—argue that relaxing such planning policies would **cause their property values and overall quality of life to decrease**.

Transitions

## From text to visuals—reinforcing the point

Minneapolis

70% of residential land is zoned for detached single-family homes



Many visuals add effect to the preceding text.

- For instance, following the discussion on the **legacy of a century of single-family zoning**, the authors insert a map (pictured on the left) showing the current extent of single-family zoning in the city of Minneapolis, and then proceed to discuss how the city's leaders aim to reverse this course by upzoning all of its single-family neighbourhoods at once.

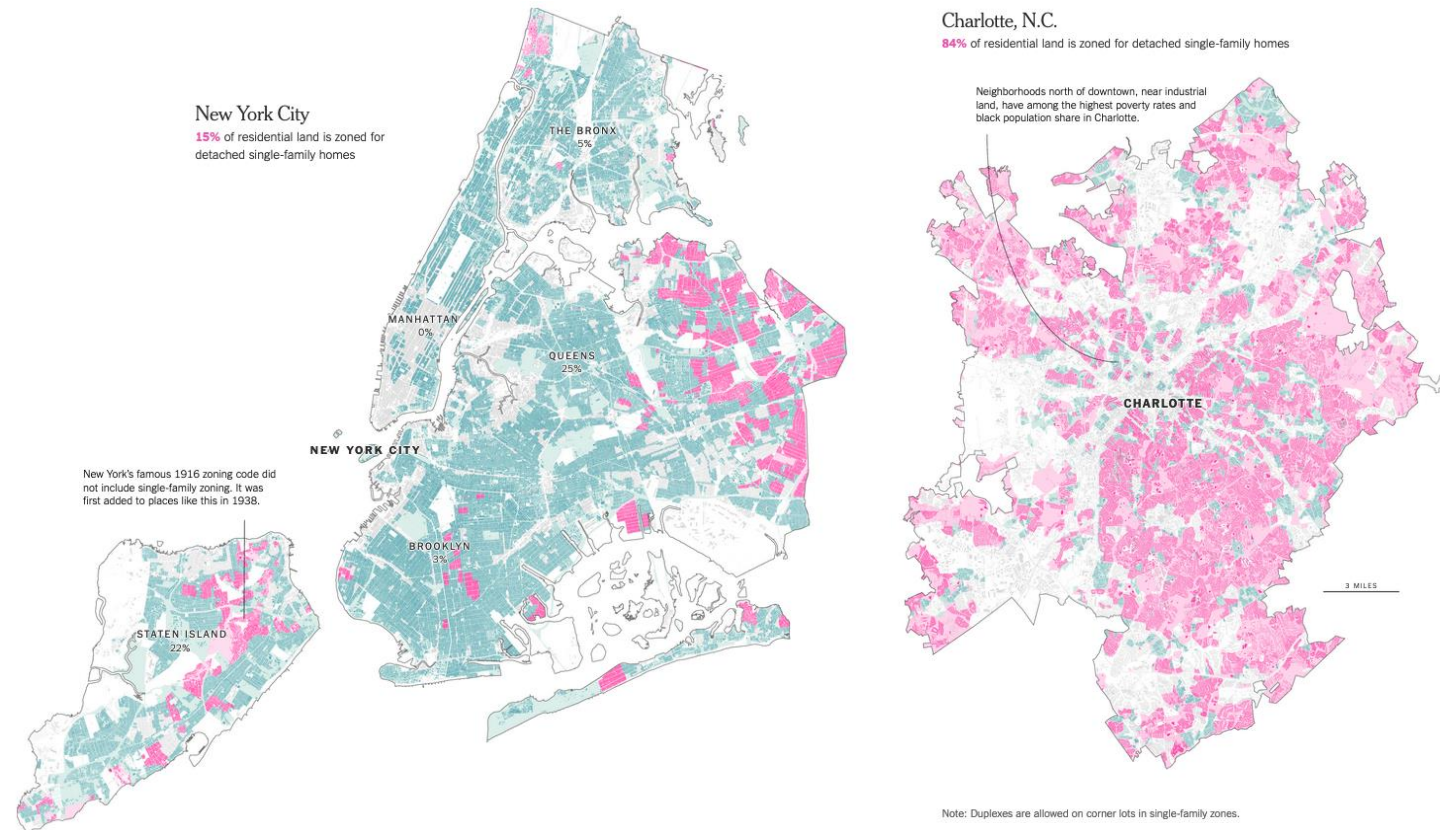
## Transitions as contrasts

Setting up contrasting case studies is an effective tool used by the authors to demonstrate the spatial impact of single-family zoning (or the lack thereof).

- For instance, the transition from the case study of New York (where there is limited single-family zoning in practice) to the case study of Charlotte (where single-family zoning dominates the city, despite apparent social problems arising from it) is effective in communicating the legacy of decades of the conventional wisdom of adopting single-family zoning in developments.

## Transitions as contrasts

### Contrast between New York and Charlotte:



## Transitions to bring out nuances in arguments

Transitions are also effectively used to bring out **nuances in the evaluation of policies regarding single-family zoning**.

- For instance, after introducing the ban on single-family zoning by Minneapolis, the authors then present the argument by opponents who caution that relaxing zoning policies is **fertile ground for developers to reap significant profits**, while not necessarily delivering social goals such as increased supply of affordable housing.



# Conclusions

## Key takeaways

**Single-family zoning still remains prevalent** in contemporary US cities.

There has been **increasing momentum to abolish single-family zoning** in some cities and states, although these tend to be accompanied by vocal opposition to plans.

While single-family zoning is associated with segregation by income and race, **ending single-family zoning does not automatically bring these social problems to an end**, particularly as commercial real estate interests dominate the sphere of urban redevelopment that such bans bring about.

## Reference

Original article from New York Times:

**Cities Start to Question an American Ideal: A House With a Yard on Every Lot (Emily Badger and Quoc Trung Bui)**

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