Bonnie Graham MacDougall, of Ithaca, New York and Alexandria, Virginia was Professor Emerita at Cornell University where she taught for 35 years in the Department of Architecture. She died unexpectedly on November 26, 2017, at the age of 76. Bonnie was born to Joseph London Graham and Myrtle Agnes Fivehouse Graham, on July 2, 1941, in Teaneck, New Jersey. She moved to Alexandria with her family when she was 8 years old where she spent the rest of her childhood, and where she later spent much of her retirement.

Bonnie graduated from Cornell University as an undergraduate in 1962 and completed her graduate work earning her Ph.D. in Linguistics, in 1973. She met her husband, Robert "Scotty" Duncan MacDougall at Cornell University, and was married in 1962. Their marriage was the beginning of a nearly 25-year personal and academic partnership, in which they collaborated on research and cross-trained each other in their respective disciplines. Although Robert predeceased Bonnie in 1987, Bonnie continued their collaborative work and published a digital collection of 7,000 of Robert's photographs, Beyond the Taj: Architectural Traditions and Landscape Experience in South Asia (2009). At the time of her death Bonnie was completing a second digital collection, since launched by the Cornell University Library as Depicting the Sri Lankan Vernacular comprising more than 500 images. In addition, her works on Sri Lankan architecture include Sinhalese Domestic Life in Space and Time (coauthored with Robert) and Text into Form: Dwelling, Cosmos, and Design Theory in Traditional South Asia (2008). She also wrote on the astronomy of Jantar Mantar (1996) and the city of Chandigarh (1996).

Bonnie was a professor and administrator at Cornell University from 1979 until her retirement in 2014, as well as a lifelong Cornell student. As a historian and social scientist, she was quite accomplished. She was a true polyglot—knowing at least ten languages—11 if you count the nicknames she had for everyone. She was a two-time Fulbright scholar (1979, 2011), the first director of the Cornell South Asian Language and Area Center (from 1983-1988) for which she raised two million dollars and was instrumental in helping establish the Cornell University/Syracuse University South Asia National Resource Center, a recipient of the Martin
Dominguez Distinguished Teaching Award in 1998, and a Faculty Innovation in Teaching Award in 2006.

In her many years in the Department of Architecture, she taught most of the architecture students in a required course on the culture of architecture. To think that she single-handedly taught every Cornell Architecture student over decades is mind-boggling. And it should be noted that she never shied away from large numbers—as she knew how to fill the Statler auditorium with 1,000 bodies. According to many students, she was the best teacher they ever had. As one student observed, it was in her required course where he first learned that buildings could be round and made of twigs.

Bonnie was a behind-the-scenes advocate for women. Maybe because she had raised two daughters or because she analyzed the changing world for her two grand-daughters. I don’t know, but she was always supportive of leading a life that combined the professional and personal. She provided a model of generosity combined with extreme literacy and straightforward verbiage. We all relied on her insights and observations—which is why she encouraged everyone to call her any time of the day or night. Which many of us did.

Bonnie was a great storyteller. She would recount how there was a sentry stationed at the end of the Thurston Avenue bridge in the early 1960s to ensure that all women making their way onto the main campus had on skirts. Not surprisingly, she had colorful stories about the perils of doing research in Sri Lanka—there were rogue pythons that crossed the path she was travelling on a motorcycle with Scotty. There were lizards in the latrine and the torrential monsoons in Colombo. She even claimed that she heard creatures scratching under her cabin at the Yala National Park on the island.

And of course, she made great chai. Cooking did not seem to be an interest—her fridge rarely had anything more than yoghurt, cottage cheese and expired milk. Nonetheless, she had strong opinions about chai.

Bonnie is survived by her two daughters, Carlin ’94 (B.Arch. ’99, M.Arch. ’00) (Jordi Mack, B.Arch 1999) and Margaret MacDougall ’96. She is also survived by her granddaughters, Elizabeth and Julia Mack.

A sign on her office door (given to her by students) seems to have said it all “Bonnie MacDougall, sponsor of many extraordinary things.”

As one of her friends observed, we were so lucky to have such a zany and generous colleague.

We were.

Written by D. Medina Lasansky