Professor John William Reps of the Department of City and Regional Planning (CRP) died November 12, 2020, age 98. John established a remarkable record as a teacher, scholar, and author. He had a tremendous impact on his many students, Cornell, and the world of city planning.

Born on November 25, 1921 in St. Louis, John grew up in Springfield, Missouri. He entered Dartmouth College in 1939 where he majored in geography and swam for the Big Green. He was in the stands at Hanover on November 16, 1940 when Dartmouth and Cornell played their legendary “Fifth-Down Game.” His honors thesis presented a land use plan for Hartford, Vermont. That work led to a summer job with the National Resources Planning Board -- a federal agency charged with examining land and resource issues across the country. In 1943, John graduated from Dartmouth summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa.

When he left college, the United States was at war. John spent 1943 to 1946 in the Army Air Corps, rising to the rank of sergeant. While stationed at Buckley Field, Colorado, he completed an evening course on city planning taught in Denver by the prominent architect and urban planner Carl Feiss. He attended the Air Corps’ Radio School and subsequently worked in the Army Airways Communications Service headquarters in Asheville, North Carolina.

John became a student again when Cornell’s spring term began in March 1946. Just out of uniform (as so many were at that time) he and seven others formed the University’s first class seeking master’s degrees in city and regional planning (MRP). He always valued highly the breadth and depth of his graduate work and repeatedly emphasized the great influence that Professor (later Dean) Thomas Mackesey had on him. Producing a master’s thesis entitled “Ideal Cities,” he completed his MRP degree in 1947.

John then spent a year at the University of Liverpool studying urban planning in Britain. Back in the United States, fortune smiled when he was asked to give a talk on the Marshall Plan in
hometown Springfield. At the event he met Constance Peck, an assistant professor teaching French at Drury University. They were married in 1948.

From 1948 to 1950 John served as planning director for Broome County, New York. He was also a CRP Lecturer, driving to Ithaca to give classes in planning law and housing. He returned to England in 1950-1951 to pursue graduate studies in public administration at the London School of Economics.

Accepting Tom Mackesey’s offer of a faculty position, John’s career as a planning professor began in January 1952. Upon arrival he became CRP’s only full time faculty member (remaining so until 1957) and department chair (a position he held until 1964). Immediately he began teaching Principles of City and Regional Planning, a required course for first year MRP students and fourth year Architecture students. Principles, along with his many other courses, quickly established John’s reputation as a teacher whose vibrant, highly informative lectures were illustrated with wonderful slides and filled with humor. For decades returning planning and architecture graduates would recall “Reps’ lectures” with fondness and admiration.

In 1964, John established a business, Historic Urban Plans, and then ran it until 1994. Accurately sensing a market for visual depictions of cities and towns, he published hundreds of city and town plans, “birds eye views” of communities, and historical maps. The venture flowed from what had become the central focus of his research and writing: i.e., the history of city planning. The business continues to flourish in Ithaca.

John was a skilled and prolific writer, producing many papers, journal articles, book chapters, and exhibition catalogues. In his earlier years his publications concentrated on planning history, planning law, and zoning administration. Soon he began writing books. Those works, and then decades of lectures flowing from them, established John as the leading expert on the history of city and regional planning in the United States.

He became in time a major authority as well on urban planning history in other countries, including Australia and Great Britain.


And what books they were! A pleasure to read, they featured detailed but easy to follow text interspersed with captivating maps, pictures, and diagrams. Each book reflected meticulous research and John’s apparently endless capacity to find and use details to tell large, multi-faceted stories. Each reflected his ability to convey ideas clearly to specialists and a broad public audience. Each reflected his boundless enthusiasm for the subjects investigated.
Many honors came John’s way, far too many to list here. From its initial publication The Making of Urban America was seen, in one reviewer’s words, as “a seminal text that will have been read by cohorts of planners on both sides of the Atlantic.” The American Historical Association awarded John the Beveridge Prize in 1980, selecting Cities of the American West as the best book that year in American history. In 1984, he received the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning’s second biennial award for Distinguished Service to Education in Planning. In 1996, the American Institute of Certified Planners named John a “National Planning Pioneer.” The Institute’s handsome bronze plaque, mounted in West Sibley’s first floor hallway, labels John “the father of American planning history.” He received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Fulbright Program, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Australian National University. In 1985, the University of Nebraska awarded him an honorary doctorate. Visiting professorships and lectureships took him to positions in several universities across the United States and in Hong Kong, Beijing, Salzburg, and The Hague. This past June the University of Notre Dame’s School of Architecture honored John posthumously with its Henry Hope Reed Award, the jury’s citation reading in part: “The results of his extraordinary scholarship and urbanist advocacy ... are quietly embedded in ... buildings and places throughout the United States and around the world.”

Notwithstanding the laurels, John’s life revolved around his family. Connie and John’s very strong union lasted until her passing in 2009. Their children, Martha and Thomas, added much to that journey. While John’s research and writing consumed many a Saturday morning. The afternoons and Sundays were family time. Winter’s Sunday afternoons often found them skating at Lynah Rink, and in warmer months the Ithaca Yacht Club was a favorite place. For some years, John and son Tom sailed in the Star races on Cayuga Lake, and for more than twenty years after his racing days ended, The Reprise, a twenty-seven foot sailboat, captured Cayuga’s winds and carried family and friends on many outings. John and Connie sat for many years, among Schoellkopf and Lynah’s faithful, cheering on the Big Red football and hockey teams.

He never stopped working. After retiring from the faculty in 1987, John graced Sibley Hall through more than three decades -- putting in full days, continuing his research, and publishing more books. Wherever one found him, he was always a source of warmth, wisdom, and wit – in his office, the lunchroom, or a lecture hall after another (always eagerly anticipated) “Reps talk.” He was particularly inspiring for young CRP faculty members. In his nineties he gave a number of talks in Ithaca and elsewhere about French Bastides, medieval towns he first visited and photographed in 1951 and then kept studying through trips to France over nearly sixty years. During March and April 2019 John treated Sibley inhabitants and visitors to a superb, final exhibit “Mapping the New York Metropolis, 1624 – 1864.”

In reviewing Cities of the American West, a British professor said in part: “This book can only be described in superlatives. It is exhaustively researched, brilliantly presented, and stunningly illustrated. It is a tour de force, fascinating in both its wealth of detail and breadth of canvas.” The same words capture much about John as an academic, an author, and a person --- always the knowledgeable and patient teacher who spoke and wrote with professionalism and excitement; always the artist who captured the entire forest and the individual trees; and always the master story teller whose sweeping narratives flowed over the years, and eventually across generations and centuries.
A feather duster hangs beside that Sibley Hall plaque. With his always irrepressible humor, John brought the duster to the plaque’s unveiling and charged department chairs with the ongoing responsibility for sweeping away the inevitable dust. Dust or no dust, John Reps was one of Cornell’s brightest stars, and he will long be remembered.

Written by Richard S. Booth, Thomas J. Campanella, and Porus Olpadwala

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