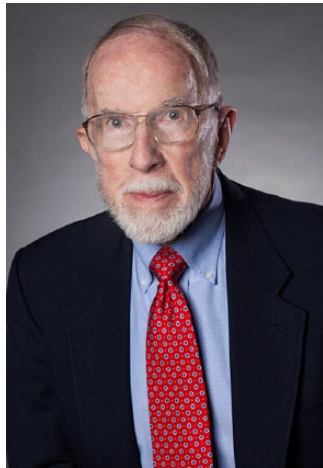


ACSP Distinguished Educator, 1984: John W. Reps

Journal of Planning Education and Research
2015, Vol. 35(4) 515–517
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DOI: 10.1177/0739456X15596069
jpe.sagepub.com



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Here at Cornell University, on a wall just down from my office in West Sibley Hall, is an imposing bronze plaque to my colleague, mentor, and friend, John William Reps. It connotes gravitas and monumentality, darkened by a deep chocolate patina. The plaque designates John as a NATIONAL PLANNING PIONEER and lists his many accomplishments as a scholar and as an educator. But it's the gossamer accessory hanging alongside that says even more about John, as a person, a man with gloriously abundant wit, charm, and humor. It is a rainbow-colored feather duster placed there by the waggish NATIONAL PLANNING PIONEER himself, to keep his plaque free of dust. John is part of a very exclusive club: those fêted in bronze, yet still here to maintain their own monuments.

John Reps has been around a while; Warren G. Harding was in the White House when he came into this world. He remembers Lindbergh's 1927 flight across the Atlantic. He graduated from college before most of our faculty was conceived. I was still in a cradle when he published *The Making of Urban American*. John first came to Cornell seventy years ago and has been *emeritus* longer than most academic careers. Yet he still comes in to the office and may be found most mornings in the staff lounge reading the paper or watching his slice of raisin bread brown in the toaster.

I tell my new class of urban studies students each fall to go see Hermon MacNeil's majestic sculpture of Ezra Cornell on the edge of the Arts Quad. The curious among them

discover, in the back, the reason Cornell had the money to transform his hilltop farm into a world-class university: the telegraphy equipment he developed with Samuel F. B. Morse that helped launch America's first telecommunications revolution. Like those curious students, John Reps has spent a lifetime peering behind façades and poking beneath the surface, searching out long-lost authors of American urbanism. He is the master of maps, a scholar who can squeeze meaning from the faintest plat-scratchings in prairie soil, America's foremost interpreter of planning intent, however buried it might be beneath the sands of time.

John was born in St. Louis on November 25, 1921, the younger son of Blanche and Louis, a dry-goods merchant. His European forebears hail from Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and—on his father's side—the Transylvanian town of Reps, now known as Rupea. John says it may have been—what else?—a planned town, not far from where Vlad the Impaler (i.e., Dracula) made his nest. John grew up in Springfield, Missouri, as the Depression loomed and the Dust Bowl choked the plains. He was a star swimmer in high school, played tennis, and performed in theatricals. He still remembers his lines. "It's the revolutionists, sir!" he barked at me the other day when I asked him about this; "They've captured the field pieces in front of the cathedral!"

John won admission to Dartmouth, where he studied geography and completed an honors thesis—a land use plan for Hartford, Vermont—that got him a summer job with the New England office of the National Resources Planning Board. His boss was Victor M. Cutter, of all people, president of the mighty, much-feared United Fruit Company. Cutter was impressed by Reps, and published his Hartford study as *New Plans for Old Towns* (1942). "The town with a plan," Cutter wrote in the foreword, "is the town with a future." Reps graduated Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude, from Dartmouth in 1943, leaving Hanover just as the world descended again into war. He was drafted almost immediately.

In the Army Air Corps, John administered psychomotor tests for aviators and helped run the War Intelligence Room

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at Buckley Field, Colorado. He took an evening course on city planning in Denver taught by the legendary Carl Feiss. He went on to Air Corps Radio School, where he learned Morse code and soon scored a plum assignment at the Army Airways Communications Service headquarters in Asheville, North Carolina. He had a good “fist,” and was able to key Morse code faster than anyone in his unit. This was serendipitous; for his next stop was the college that telegraphy helped build.

Cornell University in 1946 was an elm-embowered paradise perched, then as now, “high above Cayuga’s waters,” as the alma mater goes. Gilmore D. Clarke, prized consultant to Robert Moses and Cornell’s first professor of planning, was dean of the College of Architecture at the time. Reps studied with Thomas W. Mackesey and wrote a thesis entitled “Ideal Cities,” illustrated by reverse figure-ground drawings that his frequent lunch partner, Colin Rowe, would later use to emphasize urban spatial networks. John graduated in 1947 as part of the first class at Cornell to receive master’s degrees in city and regional planning. He went on to England to study town planning at the University of Liverpool and returned to become planning director of booming Broome County, New York, just south of Ithaca.

But the ivory tower beckoned. He won a Fulbright, studied public administration at the London School of Economics, and began focusing on an academic career. Clarke had earlier offered John a teaching job at Cornell, over lunch at the Century Club in New York. But the stiff drink the dean had ordered for John set his head buzzing and he said “No.” When a second chance came in 1952, he jumped at it. His punishment was being immediately appointed Chair of the Department of City and Regional Planning, a position he held until 1964.

John’s early scholarly work ran on two parallel tracks. He had already published several articles on planning history, but was just as focused on regulatory and administrative aspects of land-use planning. At a time when few legal scholars were writing on the subject, John published several landmark essays—in the *Duke*, *Cornell*, and *Syracuse* law reviews—on zoning controls and subdivision regulation. As a planning consultant, he helped draft land-use ordinances for Syracuse and Rome, New York, and a dozen villages affected by the St. Lawrence Seaway and projects of the New York Power Authority. In 1948, he outlined a land suitability analysis process in *The American City* using overlay maps that he had developed in Broome County, applying the methodology twenty years before it was popularized by Ian McHarg in *Design with Nature* (1969) (Reps 1948).

Some of John’s articles challenged the very core of land-use planning praxis. In 1968, he accused planners of foolishly abandoning the physical design focus of the profession, suggesting that *plan* had become a “four-letter word,” and those still crafting master plans were increasingly regarded as “practitioners of ancient tribal rituals which long since ceased to have any real meaning” (Reps 1968). The problem, John

argued, was not physical planning per se but the inability of planners to implement their plans. Planners were toothless visionaries, with little or no authority to direct outcomes. To remedy this, he proposed a radical “alternative system of land use control” that would guarantee “effective public control over the strategic elements of urban growth” (Reps 1967).

He proposed establishing a new kind of public agency—a Metropolitan Land Corporation—armed with broad legal authority to acquire, on the open market or by condemnation, lands on the urban periphery. Plans would be drafted for these areas to assure a favorable pattern of urban growth; streets would be platted, improvements made, and sites for parks and civic buildings set aside. Only then would building sites be sold or leased to developers, as needed and for only the cost of acquisition and improvement. Public interest would be put before private gain. Land speculation would be neutralized, and the flow of parcels to the market would be measured and predictable. And by promoting contiguous development, that paramount evil of American space—unregulated, leapfrog sprawl—would be eliminated (Reps 1967).

By the early 1970s, John’s passion for planning history began to eclipse his interest in land-use regulation. In 1965, he published what many consider the finest work of his career—*The Making of Urban America*. James Marston Fitch, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, commended it for giving us “for the first time a clear and coherent account of city-building in the New World” (Fitch 1965). It remains one of the charter texts in American planning history. And he was just getting started. By the 1990s, John had published a dozen books, averaging a new title every two and a half years for 30 years.

There was *Monumental Washington* (1967); *Town Planning in Frontier America* (1969); *Tidewater Towns* (1972); *Cities of the American West* (1979), winner of the Albert J. Beveridge Award for best book on American history from the American Historical Association; *Cities of the Mississippi* (1994); the magnificently produced *Bird’s Eye Views: Historic Lithographs of North American Cities* (1998); and *Canberra 1912* (1997), born out of John’s discovery of dozens of forgotten entries to the great design competition for a new Australian capital city. This body of work is extraordinary in depth and breadth, a monumental achievement of scholarship. It has won him kudos from around the world: a Guggenheim, two Fulbrights, grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Ford Foundation, and American Philosophical Society, lectureships at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Beijing University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1985, it earned him an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska.

His work has also endured. John’s prose is like a sunbeam in the forest, unburdened by the critical-theory syntax that plagues so much academic writing today—obfuscating rather than clarifying subjects and thereby putting them beyond reach of the very subalterns the whole “history from below”

enterprise was meant to serve. To John, history is an exercise in illumination. His mission has always been to elucidate and explain, to recover lost motivations and bring long-forgotten actors back to life—and to infect as many readers as possible with his tremendous passion for the urban past. John's books were never meant solely for fellow academics, but for all citizens afflicted, like him, with that most delightful of diseases—an incurable case of intellectual curiosity.

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