



JOHN NOLEN

Racism and City Planning

John Nolen (1869–1937) brought a unique perspective to landscape architecture. He faced hardship early in life and spent his formative years at Girard College, a school for orphans and fatherless white boys in Philadelphia. A diligent student with a knack for art, history, and rhetoric, Nolen worked his way through the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with honors from the Wharton School of Business in 1893. A decade later, he decided to integrate his devotion to art and public service by pursuing landscape architecture at Harvard. He took on his first civic commission, a project with the Charlotte (North Carolina) Park and

Tree Commission, before he graduated. For the rest of his life, Nolen would work to extend the benefits of his profession to a wider populace.

When he first arrived in Charlotte in June 1905, the young landscape architect thought the city had considerable potential, but its caste system shocked and troubled him. Although rapid urbanization and rising prosperity had galvanized talk of a New South, legal apartheid was enforced. The aldermen created the park commission with a stipulation that barred African Americans

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from city parks, except nurses caring for white children. When Nolen took a second trip to Charlotte that fall, he attended a theater production of *The Clansman*, based on Thomas Dixon's bestselling novel of the same name. It was an unabashedly racist portrayal of Reconstruction, replete with Ku Klux Klan members in white robes carrying blazing crosses on thundering horses, and leaving a pile of black corpses in their wake. The play drew rave reviews in the local press, but Nolen thought it "one-sided and an unworthy appeal to passion and prejudice." As the curtain fell, he was caught off-guard by the audience's resounding applause. "The people here are all stirred up about it and I am sure it will work infinite harm," he wrote to his wife. "Poor people, if they could only see that it strikes at their weakest point. My eyes are more open than ever before."

Nolen directly confronted Jim Crow in his first city planning report, *Remodeling Roanoke* (1907). He argued that citizens—regardless of class or race—be provided with essential services and humane living conditions. Nolen was no stranger to poverty, but the squalid conditions in Roanoke's African American community shocked him. The landscape, "dotted over with ramshackle negro cabins that hung insecurely on the side hills," created "an almost intolerable situation," he wrote. "For every reason—economic, sanitary, aesthetic, humanitarian—active steps should be taken to radically change the character of the city in [this] section."

Nolen's proposal was ignored. Using tax dollars to

relieve the squalor of the disenfranchised was anathema in a city where a third of the population could not vote, lived in constant fear of violence, and had only rudimentary public services. Over time Nolen would chip away at the inequities of segregation, but he never again so openly chastised the failure to meet the basic needs of African Americans as he did in his first city plan.

By the early 1910s Nolen was a champion of worker housing. He was also one of the few experts to advocate building "industrial villages" (modeled on Ebenezer Howard's garden city concept) for African Americans in the South. A trip to Tuskegee Institute in March 1911 cemented Nolen's interest in the issue. In the six years he spent working in the South, he had little direct contact with blacks. At Tuskegee, however, he experienced firsthand the feeling of being racially isolated. The only white person, he gave a lecture to an audience of 1,700 in the college chapel. The visit was eventful not for the knowledge Nolen imparted but for what he learned. "I have seen more or less of the students and their life. They appear a bright, earnest crowd, both boys and girls, and the merit of the work and scholarship is certainly good," he wrote to his wife. His observations deepened his belief that human beings had an innate

ability to set goals, plan, and create a meaningful and healthy common life. On leaving, he bemoaned that prejudice could bind a people's aspirations: "I cannot help feeling sorry for a race that must suffer so, simply because of the color of their skin."



Opposite page: African American neighborhood, Roanoke. Photograph by John Nolen, 1907. Courtesy Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Right: Harlem Village plan, 1926. Courtesy Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.



In 1919, Nolen designed his first industrial village for African Americans in conjunction with one of his most important commissions, the plan for Kingsport, Tennessee. A nondescript Appalachian village, Kingsport stood at the edge of a backwater region rich in resources. Nolen's job was to design a modern industrial city, the first comprehensive garden city in the nation. The developer eventually acceded to Nolen's requests to design a community for blacks. Bounded by a winding creek, Armstrong Village was sited on gently sloping land surrounded by an oak grove. The plan included a business district and a school fronting a civic green; housing followed the prescribed standard—four-room residences on small lots in two neighborhoods would accommodate a population of one thousand. The developer, however, balked at committing a quality site to a social experiment. A series of model worker neighborhoods were built, but not for African Americans. They ended up confined in a blighted enclave adjacent to a dye plant.

In 1922, Nolen once again tried to secure a more equitable living arrangement for southern blacks in a visionary plan to make St. Petersburg, Florida, the centerpiece of an American Riviera. The peninsular city had an alluring climate and spectacular beaches, but if it was to rival Nice, city officials had to improve the substandard living conditions in the African American

community. Nolen's plan provided three new parks, a parkway, and two neighborhood centers. It was also expected that road paving and utilities would be extended into the area.

The proposal to invest public funds in the African American community drew the ire of Lew Brown, editor of the *St. Petersburg Independent*. The "father of the white primary," Brown claimed that the "majority of Negroes are of the low order of intelligence, are not physically clean, and lacking in moral perception." Rather than improve their living conditions, Brown wanted to replace "lazy and shiftless" black laborers with immigrants from the agricultural sections of England. "It will be a happy day in the South," he said, "when white men take the place of Negroes." A referendum was held in August 1923, and only 13 percent of voters supported implementing Florida's first comprehensive city plan.

Racism also derailed Nolen's plan for West Palm Beach, where the city council wanted to relocate African Americans to three "concentrated zones" between the railroad tracks and the Everglades. "We are trying to put them in such locations as they will most congenitally be situated to their places of labor and fulfill the needs of the white people," the mayor declared. This scheme sparked a seventeen-page response from Nolen pointing out that racial zoning was unconstitutional. "It is

not possible legally to set aside such districts and restrict them to any one race or color," he wrote. The planning initiative soon lost favor, and Nolen was forced to reassess his Florida strategy. He had envisioned St. Petersburg and West Palm Beach as model cities for the South's fastest-growing state. Instead, he was stunned by the racism that subverted his work.

In 1926, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers (BLE) hired Nolen to draft a plan for the new town of Venice. "The provision for the negro working population is an issue of great importance" but "not well solved," he informed his client. The BLE allocated 230 acres for Harlem Village. Three thousand people would be housed in two neighborhoods with single-family homes set on fifty-foot lots on tree-lined streets. Another five hundred residents would reside in apartments in the community center. Space was also allocated for a school, a civic green, two large parks, three playgrounds, and four churches. In 1926 a small army of laborers, more than half of them African American, went to work building Venice. Nolen pleaded with the BLE to "speed up plans for the Negro Village," but, as in Kingsport, housing African Americans was a priority for the consultant, not his client. Harlem Village was never built. After this failure Nolen decided to pursue private commissions

where race was not the defining issue.

The town plan for Venice was Nolen's last major project in Florida. The real estate boom imploded in late 1926, and unpaid invoices from a dozen commissions sent his practice into a tailspin from which it never recovered. Nolen had believed Florida would be the blueprint for a new urban civilization, but instead corruption and blind speculation turned it into a harbinger of the Great Depression. In his final years Nolen struggled to make ends meet, yet he never despaired. Having spent his early years in an institution for the less fortunate, he learned that discipline, education, and a well-ordered physical environment were essential to individual and societal advancement. This formula was also the antidote to Jim Crow. If Nolen failed to diminish racial injustice, he was ahead of his time in his efforts to design decent communities for African Americans. Today's urban planners benefit from his impassioned example in the perpetual struggle to build cities that are both resilient and just.

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Opposite page and below: African American street workers, Venice, Florida, c. 1926. Photography by Koons Studio. Courtesy Venice Museum and Archives, Venice, Florida.

