

## Two Views of John Nolen

Journal of Planning History  
2017, Vol. 16(1) 80-84  
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Jody Beck. 2013. *John Nolen and the Metropolitan Landscape*. New York, NY: Routledge. 169 pp. \$53.95, ISBN 978-0-415-66485-1.

R. Bruce Stephenson. 2015. *John Nolen, Landscape Architect and City Planner*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press. 294 pp. \$39.95, ISBN 978-1-62534-079-5.

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DOI: 10.1177/1538513216680462

John Nolen (1869–1937) is the quintessential American pioneer planner. From his humble beginnings in Philadelphia, he became an internationally renowned city planner by 1920. His climb to the top of the newly created field of city planning reads like a Horatio Alger story. Both books are well written and backed by much scholarly research. Beck and Stephenson have both combed Nolen's numerous writings to create compelling narratives.

The two books under review here look at Nolen's life and work from two very different perspectives. Stephenson offers a richly developed biographical portrait of Nolen interwoven with a detailed discussion of his numerous planning projects. In contrast, Beck offers less of a biographical portrait of Nolen, focuses on fewer of his planning projects, and emphasizes the political and social aspects of his work. Beck concludes that Nolen was ineffective in many instances because he treated planning problems as technical issues and did not directly address the inherently political nature of all planning problems. Beck acknowledges that Nolen was typical of most, if not all planners during this time period, and looks at Nolen as a case study to explore the idea that planning is political.

Stephenson and Beck discuss a wide range of themes illustrated by Nolen's works and writings. The most interesting and well developed of these include the following: (1) his early growth and development at Girard College, Wharton School, and the American Society for the Extension of University Teaching (ASEUT); (2) his studies of landscape architecture at Harvard University; (3) travels to Europe and transatlantic exchange of ideas; (4) evolution of his approach to comprehensive planning; (5) his reflections on racism and segregation; (6) his role as educator; and (7) lessons from Nolen's life and work for today's planners.

Stephenson presents quite a rich telling of Nolen's early years, moving quickly to his father's murder in 1870 and the heartbreaking aftermath. Stephenson writes, "Little is known of John Nolen's early childhood other than that he lived in near poverty and both of his sisters had died by the time he turned eight. The financial panic of 1873 . . . intensified [his mother] Matilda Nolen's hardships. Her situation improved when she married Caleb Aaronson, but Aaronson refused to provide for his stepson. After Matilda appealed to the Children's Aid Society for help and the nine-year old child was accepted into Girard College, a residential school for orphaned boys, she moved to Newark, New Jersey" (p. 8).

Beck's narrative of this same time period is covered in much less detail and thus provides less insight. He writes, "After the death of his father, both of John's sisters died of childhood illnesses

and his mother remarried in 1876 when he was seven. John was sent to board at the Girard School and he and his mother were not reunited until her second husband died” (p. 24).

Both authors acknowledge the positive influence of Girard College on Nolen. Stephenson notes, “Nolen prospered in the orderly institutional environment. An avid reader, he excelled in literature and history” (p. 9). Nolen graduated from Girard in 1884 and after working as a clerk for the Girard estate, he entered the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Finance and Economy in 1891. Stephenson notes two of Nolen’s professors “James and Patton championed a view that the physical environment and society were interdependent and that systematical planning could improve society in general” (p. 11). This early influence of James and Patton on Nolen’s thinking would appear to mark the very beginning of his interest in landscape architecture and planning.

In October 1893, Nolen visited the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Beck writes that Nolen “. . . mentioned visiting the Fisheries, Anthropological, Forestry, Liberal Arts, Electricity and Women’s buildings and expressed his admiration for the layout of the grounds, buildings, and waterways” (p. 27). Beck expresses doubts about the influence attending the expo might have had on Nolen becoming a landscape architect, noting that “it was another ten years before he began his studies at Harvard” (pp. 27–28). Stephenson offers evidence that the expo had an early and long-lasting impact on Nolen and his views on the value of well-designed public spaces. Soon after visiting the exposition, Nolen exclaimed, “It opened my mind to all that is grand and beautiful and good in the world” (pp. 16–18). Late in life, Nolen praised the exposition for its aesthetic harmony and placement of buildings.

After graduating from Wharton, Nolen accepted a position with the ASEUT. Stephenson notes, “Teaching provided a quick entry into the field of civic reform” (p. 18) and “. . . it was an opportunity to meet other reformers” (p. 19). Nolen honed his public-speaking skills by moderating class discussions and began editing the group’s journal, where “he reviewed a wide range of articles and developed a particular interest in municipal affairs” (p. 20).

Both authors describe two events in 1902 that spurred Nolen’s decision to become a landscape architect and attend Harvard: he received a copy of the book *Charles Eliot, Landscape Architect* and read it with great enthusiasm, and he visited Central Park. Stephenson notes, “It was Eliot’s life experience, as much as his skills as a practitioner, that inspired Nolen to become a landscape architect” (pp. 31–32). He began at Harvard in 1903, with Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and Arthur Shurcliff as instructors. While Beck offers almost no details of Nolen’s years at Harvard, Stephenson mines this period for the insight it provides on Nolen’s later practice. During his first year at Harvard, Stephenson notes, “Nolen chafed over the long hours spent indoors rather than in the field” (p. 38). Nolen soon adapted to increased study and was especially influenced by Denman Ross’s course on design theory. In fact, Nolen adopted Ross’ mantra, “Art for life’s sake, not art for art’s sake” (p. 40) into his practice. One of the highlights of the second year was a tour of Central Park and Prospect Park by Olmsted Jr. Stephenson writes, “Any misgivings Nolen may have had about the lack of pragmatic application in the Harvard curriculum vanished after this outing” (p. 41).

Stephenson writes that Nolen was an outstanding student at Harvard. His closest ties were with faculty, Olmsted Jr. and Shurcliff, who were both a year younger than the thirty-four-year-old Nolen (p. 37). In his final semester in 1905, Olmsted Jr. asked Nolen to write a biography of his father, Olmsted Sr. The series was published in 1906 and revealed Nolen’s thoughts on the elder Olmsted. Nolen described Olmsted as a “Renaissance man who valued nature, self education, and public service” (p. 45). Olmsted established the profession of landscape architecture in America, which Nolen described as “an art particularly suited to American conditions in high service of the American people” (p. 45). Nolen expressed his own ideas about the future of landscape architecture and the need to address urban issues ranging from “disease mitigation to procuring play areas for children” (p. 45).

Nolen traveled extensively in Europe and maintained correspondence and exchanged information with many of the top planners of Europe. He was inspired by the physical layout and beauty of

European cities and government's role in their organization. His first trip was in 1895 as part of his work with ASEUT to attend the Seventh Annual Conference of University Extension held in Oxford. He toured the English countryside where he was exposed to works of landscape architects Lancelot "Capability" Brown, William Kent, and Humphry Repton. He then toured London and Paris. He returned to Europe in 1896 on his six-week honeymoon touring Scotland, Wales, Cologne, and Paris. Stephenson writes, "They left the continent intent on returning, especially to Germany, where [his new wife] Barbara had relatives and where John was determined to study" (p. 22).

Beginning in the summer of 1901, Nolen spent a year on sabbatical in Germany to study at the University of Munich where he took a variety of classes including Italian painting, German architecture and art, and Renaissance history. Traveling with his wife and young child, they first visited family in Saxony and then toured the Swiss Alps. Nolen was especially taken with Lucerne, Switzerland. Stephenson notes, Nolen found "... an unmatched aesthetic unity. Railways and major roads ran in tandem to minimize grade crossings" (pp. 25–26). Stephenson observantly notes this early instance of Nolen's lifelong interest in balancing aesthetics and functionality.

While studying in Munich, Nolen was introduced to the writing of Camillo Sitte. Sitte advocated a return to earlier organic design of city streets and public squares. Nolen attended the Second International Housing Congress held in Dusseldorf in 1902 and was impressed with the breadth of German planning. Stephenson writes, "Nolen's interest in civic art and urban planning intensified as he adapted to life in Germany" (p. 27) and "[l]iving in Germany confirmed Nolen's belief that investment in the public good—from subsidizing worker housing to efficiently placing utilities—was integral to improving urban life" (p. 29). Beck gives a brief description of Nolen's year in Germany, contradicting some of Stephenson's observations. Beck writes, "While he did not focus on notable landscapes or cities during his travels, Nolen was exposed to several significant municipal landscapes during this year" (p. 28). Beck makes no mention of the International Housing Congress, even though it surely marks an important introduction for Nolen to European thoughts on housing.

Nolen returned to Europe in 1906 and made his first visit to Letchworth, the first garden city developed on the principles of Ebenezer Howard. Founded in 1903, Letchworth was designed by architects Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker, two men with whom Nolen maintained long-term correspondence. Stephenson writes that Nolen's "... trip to Letchworth would cause him to reconsider his practice and focus on the importance of town planning, particularly the potential for incorporating landscape architecture into Garden City design" (p. 61).

Nolen's work on comprehensive planning began with Roanoke, Virginia, in 1907 and San Diego, California, in 1908. The success of these two plans led to an even larger planning effort in Madison, Wisconsin. Both authors write about this project in detail, Stephenson devoting much of Chapter 5, "City Planning in America and Europe, 1908-1911" (pp. 93–115), and Beck devoting all of Chapter 3, "A Model City, The Hope of Democracy" (pp. 55–82). A center of progressive ideas largely because of its governor, Robert M. La Follette, Sr., the "Wisconsin Idea" also reflected efforts by state college faculty to improve local governments and promote reform measures.

The result of Nolen's efforts, "Madison: A Model City," was published in 1911. Beck very observantly notes the innovative organization of the Madison report "... around the functions of the city and not around the physical components such as parks, streets, and waterfronts" (p. 66). The six functions include "The Individuality of Madison," "Madison as a Capital City," "Madison as an Educational Center," "Madison as a Place of Residence," "The Future City of Madison," and "Supplemental Notes" (p. 66).

Both authors agree, the Madison plan proved to be a milestone in Nolen's career. Stephenson notes that Nolen's "practice was secure and his expertise acknowledged" (p. 110). Beck concludes his discussion of the Madison plan with the observation that Nolen "... often connected better city planning with better democracy, [though] it must be stated that he was no populist.

The more ordered parts of the city were not emblematic of a belief in democracy as a process of building consensus” (p. 80).

In addition, the implications of racism and segregation, and the role of a professional planner as an advocate for decent housing for African Americans, played a central role in Nolen’s career. One of Nolen’s early encounters with racism is recounted by Stephenson. During a business trip in October 1905 to Charlotte, North Carolina, Nolen “attended a theater production of ‘The Clansman’ . . . It was an unabashedly racist portrayal of Reconstruction, replete with self-interested, plotting Yankee politicians, and Ku Klux Klan members clad in white robes carrying blazing crosses, on thundering hooves and leaving a pile of black corpses in their wake” (p. 53). Nolen was “. . . caught off guard by the audiences resounding applause” (p. 53). He wrote to his wife Barbara, “Poor people, if they could only see that it strikes at their weakest point. My eyes are more open than ever before” (p. 53).

In March 1911, Nolen visited the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to create a campus plan. Stephenson documents Nolen’s reflections on this visit, “My first impression was the great hall of the Chapel—1,700 Negroes and I the only member of the white race . . . It was an impressive spectacle to look out upon this sea of black faces” (p. 127). Nolen observed, “. . . the merit of the work and scholarship is certainly good. I only wish that our children could have its benefits.” (p. 127). He concludes by remarking, “I cannot help feeling sorry for a race that must suffer so, simply because of the color of their skin” (pp. 127–28).

Nolen faced the issue of segregated housing head on. He was aware of the terrible conditions of housing for African Americans. For cities in the south, this meant designing segregated housing, but even these measures were met with uniform resistance. Stephenson recalls a typical example, Nolen’s design for a “Negro Village” in the industrial new town of Kingsport, Tennessee. Called “Armstrong Village,” the center of the site featured a village green with a public school and a small commercial center. Intended to house 1,000 residents, the plans for the segregated community were scrapped because the developers of Kingsport believed “. . . it was a waste ‘to give the colored people such a fine piece of land’” and instead “. . . African Americans were confined to living in a blighted neighborhood near a dye plant” (p. 155).

During the Depression, Nolen focused a greater part of his attention to planning education. Harvard opened their school of planning in 1929 with Henry Hubbard as director and John Nolen and Thomas Adams as instructors. Stephenson writes, “The new school reinvigorated Nolen. An acknowledged ‘lifelong student,’ he was soon invested in teaching and developing a new avenue of research grounded in social science” (p. 217). The practice of planning in the early 1930s was shifting toward an emphasis on engineering and quantitative methods, as mirrored in the Modernist movement in architecture, with its focus on efficiency and the machine. Nolen stuck to his traditional approach “. . . to teach city planning as a mix of art and science” (p. 218).

In his town planning course, writes Stephenson, Nolen “. . . encouraged students to glean knowledge from the historical city. Classical Athens, Renaissance Florence, and republican Geneva were repositories of civic design and spiritual value that offered essential insight into the ‘well-ordered organic city’” (p. 219). Nolen told students what it took to be a successful planner: “the wisdom of Solomon, the heart of a prophet, the patience of Job, and the hide of a rhinoceros.” When designing new cities, Nolen focused on the garden city. His students “analyzed Letchworth, Hampstead Garden Suburbs, Forest Hills Gardens, Mariemont, and Radburn.” Students analyzed the surrounding neighborhoods of Cambridge to “measure the attributes of a walkable urban environment” (p. 219).

In 1936, the conflict between modernism and Nolen’s traditional approach of city planning as a mixture of “art and science” reached a point of crisis at Harvard. Stephenson writes the new dean of architecture, Joseph Hudnut, wanted to “reorient the design professions architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning;” Hudnut claimed, “Planning [is] not an art but a social science” (p. 225), a position that opposed Nolen’s views about the importance of creating plans that address

problems from both aesthetic and functional perspectives. In July 1936, the School of City Planning closed. Beck does not cover Nolen's time at Harvard.

What lessons we can take from the life and work of John Nolen? Stephenson concludes his book with a thoughtfully written four-page epilogue. He first writes about Nolen's comprehensive plan for St. Petersburg, Florida, and his recommendation to limit excessive dredging and filling in the harbor, which was subsequently ignored by local officials. Harland Bartholomew updated the St. Petersburg plan in 1940 and "... dismissed Nolen's work as the 'optimistic opinion of the ideal city' . . . . The natural conditions that Nolen deemed essential were ignored" (p. 231). During the 1970s, limits were finally placed on filling and dredging, and the city eventually adopted a plan to "... create a more pedestrian-oriented and ecologically balanced city" (pp. 231–32) that followed some of the same ideas Nolen had promoted in 1923.

Perhaps Nolen's biggest impact on modern planning is the rediscovery of his pedestrian-oriented suburbs and "new towns" in the 1980s and the creation in 1993 of the Congress for the New Urbanism, which sees him as a forefather. The plans for Seaside were inspired by Nolen's new town of Venice, Florida. Others found inspiration in the layout of Mariemont and Myers Park. Stephenson concludes his epilogue with the thought that "With the rise of the new urbanism and smart growth movements, Nolen's concept of planning has taken hold and will continue to evolve" (p. 234). He also observes how Nolen feared "the merging of neighborhoods into the soulless urban mass." "His solution was to strike a balance between nature and the city, and between public and private rights" (p. 234).

Beck offers a very different set of lessons for today's planners from the life and work of John Nolen. In his sixth and final chapter, "The Problem with Practical Arguments" (pp. 144–54), Beck writes further about his central critiques of Nolen. He states, "This emphasis on technical proposals, while downplaying the political nature of the problems he wished to address with them, is characteristic of Nolen's career" (p. 144). Beck finds an explanation for Nolen's emphasis on "technical proposals" in the book *The New Frontier: A study of the American Liberal Spirit, Its Frontier Origin, and Its Applications to Modern Problems* by Guy Emerson in 1920. In a letter to Raymond Unwin, Nolen commented the book was "one of the sanest interpretations of the contemporary political situation." Beck writes, "The frontier spirit that according to Emerson would solve the problems of the day was a spirit of individualism, hard work, optimism, and fair dealing. While this spirit was a spirit of both practicality and idealism, practicality was by far the dominant trait" (p. 144). Beck concludes this chapter with the idea that "... we must recognize that the design of the inhabited landscape is fundamentally a political act, and that the application of technique will always and unavoidably be in the service of implicit if not explicit political ends" (p. 154).

Beck's critique of Nolen is difficult to understand due to a lack of context. Beck needs to provide more background and analysis regarding his critique that "design is a political act." I would like to know his views on the role of landscape architects and planners as consultants and political actors as well as the role of the client as a political actor.

Stephenson's much stronger biographical component allows the reader to see how Nolen's life experiences shaped his professional work. Especially impressive is Stephenson's discussion of Nolen as a progressive during his work at ASEUT and his early travels to Europe. His discussion of Nolen's years at Harvard as a student and as an educator provide interesting insights on his later contributions as a planner and landscape architect. The epilogue nicely ties Nolen's work to current trends in the practice of city planning. The numerous color photographs make the book a visual delight and the excellent index makes referencing the book a breeze.