

New Nolen for Old

New Towns for Old

by John Nolen

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Reviewed by Rob Robinson, AIA

The first thing that strikes the reader after a few pages of John Nolen's original 1927 text *New Towns for Old* is its underlying optimism about progress, technology, automobiles, society and civic responsibility. It is an optimism that we don't experience all that often today. The book – Nolen's last – re-published this year with a new introduction by Charles D. Warren, is a series of project descriptions that cover a number of built projects that came out of Nolen's planning firm in Cambridge, MA, between 1905 and 1927. While the project descriptions are a bit difficult to dive into, the project types and the focus of the planning work should be interesting to urbanists working the "middle ground" of new towns, new neighborhoods and small-town expansion.

Nolen's legacy picks up on European Garden City planning principles and North American principles established largely by Frederick Law Olmsted with places like Forest Hills, NY; Roland Park in Baltimore, MD; the suburb of Riverside, IL; and Palos Verdes Estates, CA. These plans come out of a landscape architect's eye for the picturesque and the desire for a balance between natural systems and forms and built environments. Nolen's education as a landscape architect at Harvard followed undergraduate studies at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. At Harvard, Olmsted, Jr., was one of his principal teachers. The influence of the body of planning work from Olmsted, Sr.'s office, produced from the unique perspective of the landscape architect, found purchase with Nolen.

The design of new urban fabric was more interesting to Nolen than the conventional practice of landscape architecture that focused largely on garden and park design. He was driven, and began working on commissions long before graduating. By 1910, three years after graduating, Nolen had already worked on planning commissions for San Diego, CA; Roanoke, VA; and Charlotte, NC; and had just started on Madison, WI. The emphasis on city planning and development mirrored the Olmsted practice model.

The time period represented in the book is interesting because of the sponsorship and commissions of complete places rather than bits and



Myers Park, Charlotte, NC, was developed as a 10,000-acre residential suburb in 1911 for the Stephens Company.

pieces. There is some of that in the book, but mostly the larger plans of new settlements or precincts read as a stronger part of the practice. Nolen was determined to change the conventional model of the surveyor's imposed grid over any landscape as the generator of American towns and cities to a more "fitted" pattern of streets, blocks and public spaces. This reading of landscape form and play against natural forms was part of the legacy and context for his work. In studying many of his plans, one is struck by the clarity of the urban work. Interesting block forms with sufficient, straight-ahead block and street fabric within which Nolen inserts geometric twists and turns create interest and special places. Often the natural preservation of topography or preserved streams and environmental resource areas provide a foil for the regularized geometry. These well-resolved plans are a study of Nolen's art and method. Great lessons can be learned from them, as both two-dimensional and three-dimensional designs.

This work was influenced heavily by the English Garden City movement practiced and promoted by architects and town planners like Sir Raymond Unwin. New towns like Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City in England are reflected in many of Nolen's designs and writings. He toured Europe and became interested in the German approach to city planning, which was widely referenced as a model in the northeast planning schools. There is also a heavy dose of responsibility to make better places for the working class and create an alternative from the overcrowding and often dismal condition of housing in the industrial cities of both Europe and the United States. This thinking extended to social responsibility as a broad topic of the day.

The early 1900s became an era for the company town as well as the first public housing efforts for workers in the shipyards during the war effort. The early seeds of ideas about uniform or segregated economic neighborhoods appear in this body of work. While there is an interesting intellectual and patriotic mindset about the quality of life and purpose that directs the planning concepts, there is also a glimpse into the cultural bias and perception of both racial and ethnic incompatibility. Nolen wonders aloud how to control immigrant residents who can't properly maintain or live in the outdoor spaces created by the community plans. The early arrival of strict design guidelines and the predecessor to homeowner associations and regulations pop up in many of the project discussions.

For practicing urban designers and planners, the background information provided by Warren may be the most valuable content in this publication. The project descriptions are difficult to digest as more than a bit of context for the commissions. I find that the art of planning and sensitivity to creating great addresses with public infrastructure is a fascinating hallmark of Nolen's approach. The landscape architect's attention to the subtle changes in setbacks, street and park character, approach and orientation can be seen in the built work. He was also interested in the same principles embraced by practitioners of urbanism today. Connectivity, walkable neighborhoods, picturesque communities, preservation and enhancement of natural resources, streets for people, defined rural and urban edges – these elements are fundamental to the way we need to think about expanding towns and building new ones. The idea of sustainable design methodology is present in this work, and was an intellectual underpinning in the early 1900s. Reading Albert Shaw's original introduction is not far removed from the discussion we have today about social equity, appropriate balance between nature and the built environment, corporate and civic responsibility and regional sense of place. ■

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Towns like Welwyn Garden City, developed in 1920 in England, are reflected in many of Nolen's designs and writings. This is an ad for Welwyn that was originally published in *Punch*, The Christmas Number, 1926.