

BOOK REVIEWS

New Towns for Old: Achievements in Civic Improvement in Some American Small Towns and Neighborhoods

By John Nolen

Introduction by Charles D. Warren

University of Massachusetts Press in association
with the Library of American Landscape History,
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REVIEW BY THOMAS J. COMITTA

The long wait is over! For those of us who have waited many years for the first edition of *New Towns for Old* by John Nolen to be reprinted, the American Society of Landscape Architects Centennial Reprint Series has come to the rescue. The first edition, printed in 1927, sold out quickly. Actually, John Nolen gave many copies to prospective clients, similar to the way we give out brochures to our clients today.

The 2005 reprint edition includes the scholarly and painstaking research that Charles D. Warren conducted in producing the Introduction. Warren, a New York City based architect, provides incredible insights into the evolution of Nolen's career, the progression of his town planning work, and his plan making for small American towns and neighborhoods. Charles Warren was the Town Architect in Seaside, Florida in 1990-91. His research at Cornell University (John Nolen Papers) and at the University of Pennsylvania (Nolen Plans) is illuminated in the introduction, where he discusses Nolen's friendship with Sir Raymond Unwin and his respect for Camillo Sitte. Warren also includes additional plans and illustrations and a helpful project list of nearly 400 projects that span the period from 1904 to 1934.

John Nolen (1869 to 1937) was the first American to identify himself exclusively as a town and city planner. Nolen's

approach merged town planning, architecture, landscape architecture and engineering. His firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts, completed more than 350 commissions throughout the United States over a 33-year period. One of the best known places that Nolen planned, designed, and directed from the ground up is Mariemont, Ohio. Mariemont is profiled with such places as Kingsport, Tennessee; Union Park Gardens in Wilmington, Delaware; Venice, Florida; Myers Park in Charlotte, North Carolina; Kistler, Pennsylvania; and Overlook Colony in Claymont, Delaware.

In the preface to the first edition from 1927, Nolen writes: "The primary purpose of this book is to describe a few representative examples of civic improvement actually carried out." Nolen provided "concrete illustrations of fundamental principles." In addition to the places cited above, detailed plans from Bridgeport, Connecticut; Longmeadow, Massachusetts; and Belleair, Florida (near Clearwater) are included. There is also one classic diagram that is a good example of a mixed-use place, with a somewhat Transect-based quality, titled "A Method of Zoning" by Raymond Unwin.

Nolen claimed that his book also has two secondary purposes: to draw attention to the economic and social advantages of towns, and to the ease with which they can be improved; and, to plead for more new towns, skillfully planned in favorable locations. He advocated a multidisciplinary approach and alliances with the American Civic Association and the National Conference on City Planning. Nolen wrote that town planning is an indispensable art, albeit with results that come slowly.

Nolen, born in Philadelphia, entered the Wharton School of Finance and Economy at the University of Pennsylvania in 1891. In 1893, he visited the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and was impressed by Burnham and Olmsted's grand unified scheme. Nolen then wrote of "a deep desire to do *something* in this great universe." He was one of the first students to enroll in the Landscape Architecture program at Harvard in 1902, where he studied under Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.

We would all benefit from reading this book, especially to brush up on the plan-

ning techniques and to realize Nolen's achievements in civic improvement. While the long wait for this reprint is over, it is timely to see how the Nolen-Sitte-Olmsted-Burnham-Unwin system for street, blocks, and places takes form. ♦

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