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Planners rediscover a pioneer

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People who suggest that Asheville should move toward more walkable neighborhoods not centered around automobiles owe more than a tip of the hat to John Nolen.

Nolen was one of the founding fathers of urban planning and, operating from a base in Massachusetts, left his mark on Asheville and hundreds of other cities and communities around the nation during the first few decades of the 20th century.

He drew up a city plan for Asheville in the 1920s that envisioned a city linked by greenways with small commercial centers throughout, designed with the idea in mind that people would use public transportation or their feet for many, if not most, of their local travels.

It could be a bit humbling for a planner to look at Nolen's plan today. Many of his ideas are only now being realized and some probably never will be. It wasn't until the past couple of decades that parks along the lines that Nolen envisioned along the French Broad River in West Asheville were created.

And Interstate 240 plows beneath Haywood Road at just about the spot where Nolen thought a small commercial area to serve surrounding neighborhoods should be.

On the other hand, Nolen expert Tom Low says, "Good ideas never die." City and county government have taken steps in recent months toward establishing a park on the ridge to the southeast of downtown that would offer broad views of the city and the mountains to the west, something Nolen also suggested.

Low is director of town planning in the Charlotte office of Duany Plater-Zybeck & Co., a pioneering firm of new urbanism. The movement seeks to return to some of the ideas Nolen advocated, including more compact neighborhoods with a mix of housing types and easy use of public transportation and sidewalks.

Low recently completed the forthcoming book, "Civic by Design: John Nolen's Lessons for New Urbanism" and was in Asheville last week to discuss Nolen's legacy in a lecture and workshop sponsored by the Asheville Section of the American Institute of Architects.

Following are excerpts from an interview with Low by the Citizen-Times.

Question: Who was John Nolen?

Answer: John Nolen started his (urban planning) practice right at the beginning of the 20th century. This was something that grew out of the "city beautiful" movement by some of the really well known landscape architects, especially Frederick Law Olmstead Sr. They were working at the end of the 19th century ...embellishing and beautifying their cities so they would rival the great European capitals and other places around the globe.

The next generation of the Olmstead firm and (Nolen's firm), along with a handful of others, were really the firms that really kind of started the planning profession as it's known today. It had to do with

not only addressing embellishing our cities with beauty but also a lot of the practical things that were needed, having to do with sanitation, having to do with crowding, having to do with transportation, a lot of very technical things. One of the sayings that John Nolen is known for is, "What is fair must be fit," that cities should be practical along with beautiful. You can't just beautify the surface without getting down and making things work from a functional point of view.

Q: How did you get interested in him?

A: After I graduated from architecture school in 1979, I spent 10 years as kind of a corporate cog here in Charlotte, working for various corporate firms as an associate rising through the ranks. After 10 years I kind of got burned out because I was designing buildings sitting in parking lots and I just felt like there was something missing. The last straw was basically a new interchange on I-85 north of Charlotte. ... I was asked to take suburban zoning and lay out this big master plan, and I stood back using these segregated zoning pods of office parks and hotel clusters and shopping centers and housing pods and apartment pods, big spine roads and collector roads everywhere. And I sat back and looked at it and said I would hate to live in a place like this. There was so much missing from it.

Q: What are some of the ideas that Nolen came up with that you think are relevant to urban planning in general these days?

A: He was very interested in improving the average person's quality of life, and he felt like that city planning was one of the best ways to do that on a broad scale, as far reaching as possible. ...

The principles that the new urbanists are using parallel John Nolen's planning work. History is repeating itself. We've entered a kind of renaissance in terms of understanding how to create places that offer wonderful quality of life. You could talk about these same compact, connected, mixed-use, mixed-income, walkable communities which really respond to the population as it's aging. ...

The aging baby boomers, we're different from our parents' generation. All over the mountains around Asheville, the American dream of our parents' generation was the Thoreau model of the cabin in the woods, getting away from it all and having this kind of quiet personal, separate space. What people are finding is that when they finally kind of achieve that American dream, they get lonely, they get bored and they feel isolated and they want to reconnect and sometimes it's difficult, especially if you're driving down mountain roads at night. The baby boomers, when they retire, they don't want to retire, they want to stay active. They don't want to get away from it all they want to stay connected and they want to stay involved. And so a lot of the renaissance happening in Asheville right now in the center city is having to do with that demographic redefining itself.

The second big group after the baby boomers are the millennials (born mostly in the 1980s and '90s and sometimes called Generation Y). The millennials think that the suburbs are the boringest place on earth and that's a place that they flee from, if they can, as soon as they're old enough. The places they want to go to are active, vibrant, just very social, urban centers. So we're all going back to the model that John Nolen described. Instead of doing these kind of isolated subdivisions that are marketed as being private and exclusive. ... John Nolen wanted to make things more public and inclusive.

The design principles behind what he proposed are the foundations of our work as new urbanists. It has to do with things like making the neighborhood unit the basic building block as opposed to just separating things apart (and,) at the regional level, connecting open space with greenways...and also when you have wonderful amenities within your communities, sharing them as opposed to giving them to just a few. Nolen also proposed having small little shopping centers supporting each neighborhood so everyone was within walking distance, the idea of having schools and parks within walking distance of every resident and you can see in his overlay plans for Asheville, these are dotted throughout the area. ... There are a lot of things that are kind of neighborhood scale. They were wonderfully connected together and actually created these wonderful community spaces and green spaces.

Q: It sounds like from what you've said that he may have helped found this field but the Depression

came along, World War II, the automobile became more prevalent ... and his ideas lost influence.

A: I think so. After World War II we came back and kind of embraced this expansion with automobiles, kind of the romance of the car, also the idea of getting away. All these things kind of came together and his whole ... body of work (was forgotten). The first book I found on John Nolen ... was published in 1919. When I found it in the library, it hadn't been checked out for probably 30 years.

Q: Can affordable housing be built along John Nolen's principles?

A: Yes, absolutely and he talks a little about it in the Asheville report, how apartments, if they're not done well, offer an inferior quality of life. If they're located near stores and not so intrusive into single-family homes but connected, they have their place and they can serve the community well. (Planners today are) getting away from building these huge pockets of affordable housing and putting smaller pockets in different places. If it's interspersed in this way, it can actually be a very positive thing, it actually creates a real society.

Today's zoning makes it very difficult to think in terms of that mixture of incomes where there may be a small apartment house next to a duplex next to a couple of cottages next to a nice house and then on the corner maybe a big mansion. ...

(A key factor is) when you overcome this density issue. Where does it say that everyone deserves a house on a half-acre lot? That's the suburban dream which really is starting to very quickly disappear from the public's image of what's important. And people are really discovering that these compact, connected communities are far superior in many ways.
