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SMOKESTACKS & GERANIUMS ♦♦ ROGER M. SHOWLEY



Forgotten visionary

Nearly 100 years ago, an urban planner set down concise components for San Diego's future development

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“San Diego has the location and the physical foundation in general for an important, perhaps a great city. Its people are awake to its needs, and are resolved to meet them. It stands, therefore, upon the threshold of a truly sound and far-reaching development; for, when to superb natural advantages and human enterprise are added a sound public policy and a comprehensive plan of action, who can doubt the outcome?”

– John Nolen, 1908

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the arrival of John Nolen in San Diego.

John who?

John Nolen, the urban planner who in his 1908 report, “San Diego: A Comprehensive Plan for Its Improvement,” reconceived the city's image and imagined a new destiny.

Seventy years after his death, Nolen's vision remains inspiring and topical.

Linking the city's two great assets, San Diego Bay and Balboa Park, was his idea, one which is now coming to fruition along the Park Boulevard corridor.

Another of his ideas was to place a civic center on the waterfront. Accomplished in 1938, the County Administration Center is today arguably the grandest public building in the region.

He advocated broad avenues – later engineered into many of today's freeways – and little neighborhood parks, too few of which have been built.

He was in favor of community planning, building codes and zoning and, later, affordable housing for the average family and the proper siting of airports.

Over a 30-year association with San Diego, during which he made frequent visits to the city from his base



San Diego Historical Society
During his first trip to San Diego in the fall of 1907, John Nolen (right) traveled to Pine Hills near Julian with developer Ed Fletcher (left) and merchant George W. Marston, who sponsored Nolen's work in San Diego for the next 30 years. Nolen produced a second plan in 1926.

outside the gates of Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., Nolen lectured San Diego on its historic roots, its natural environmental setting, its opportunity to right the mistakes of the past and the chance to set an example for what he called “replanning” the city.

Implementation of his 1908 plan did not come immediately and it required a follow-up in 1926 to gain official approval.

But one attribute of both plans is worth noting: They were short and readable.

As Nolen wrote his San Diego patron George W. Marston, “I have aimed at a concise expression because long reports are not read by many ... ”

By contrast, the multitude of plans that flow out of public and private professional offices these days read like mush, padded with gibberish and end up gathering dust. It shouldn't surprise the professionals when they hold a hearing on the San Diego Association of Government's Regional Comprehensive Plan and only the most devoted of policy wonks show up.

When Nolen came to town, by contrast, hundreds turned out.

At a 1913 address, 300 people “who crowded the hall cheered him to the echo,” according to a newspaper account. After extolling San Diego's natural virtues, he said:

“What is needed is public-spirited leaders: men who are able to focus opinion and direct it to the actual work of building. Such leaders must always contend with reactionary forces – the forces of stingy economy that will only see the present profit and not the distant advantage.”

A century after he turned his attention to San Diego's needs and produced its first comprehensive land-use plan, his words have not lost their fire.

Consider this passage from his 1908 plan:

“While San Diego has not yet a large population (less than 40,000 then), it is steadily growing (1.3 million now), and there isn't a citizen without faith in its future. That faith must now express itself in action, for it is well known that public improvements requiring the acquisition of large property must precede population: otherwise they are impossible.

“A comprehensive and practicable plan is under consideration. It will take months to work it out even on paper, and years to execute it. But now is the time to adopt a far-reaching scheme the result of which, I believe, will surpass our fondest dreams.”

Leader in his field

Nolen, born June 14, 1869, in Philadelphia, came from humble roots and rose to become the nation's pre-eminent city planner. He completed 450 commissions, including 29 comprehensive city plans and 27 new-town plans, according to San Diego historian Richard Amero.

He came to San Diego's attention after Marston, serving on the Chamber of Commerce's Civic Improvement Committee, offered to pay the cost of a nationally recognized expert to draw up a comprehensive plan for the city's development.

By the spring of 1907, Marston was corresponding with Nolen, who had received his master's degree in landscape architecture just two years before from Harvard and completed work on park plans for Charlotte, N.C., and Savannah, Ga.

That fall, he arrived in San Diego and Marston took him on a tour of the region, including a drive to Pine Hills near Julian where the Marston family still owns a cabin.

The finished plan, dated September 1908 and available in the California Room of the central library downtown, runs 109 pages, including dozens of photos, several maps and an appendix of excerpts from other city thinkers and sources for more reading.

Charles Mulford Robinson, the first professor of planning at the University of Illinois, soon obtained a copy after a visit to several California cities and commented, "I hope that the receipt in Los Angeles of such a fine report from San Diego may stir up the larger city, where an appropriation for publication of my report is now pending."

Nolen's plan included a civic center centered on the block just east of the present county courthouse on Broadway; a bay-park link, what he called a "paseo," along Date Street; a system of neighborhood and regional parks, plenty of street trees; and a series of boulevards that he said should carry "picturesque" and expressive names "in the soft words of the Spanish language."

After Nolen's plan was published in the Jan. 1, 1909, edition of *The San Diego Union*, Marston and other supporters went to work to get it implemented. But that very year, the chamber put higher priority on hosting the Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park in 1915-16, and harbor commissioners made industry rather than tourism the focus of waterfront improvements.

By 1924, Marston, then in his 70s, brought Nolen back for a second look. His new plan, released in early 1926, moved the civic center to the waterfront, adjusted his street system to accommodate the automobile and touted the benefits of zoning and regional planning.

He also said planning doesn't succeed without public support and he urged civic groups to engage in an ongoing educational campaign.

"City planning, like any other large public projects," he concluded, "depends upon the adoption of plans that take into account what is best not merely for one class of the community nor for a special interest, and not from the point of view of one year only, but considering the welfare of the city in the long run and the people as a whole."

A city planner once toted up Nolen's recommendations and found that much of it has come to pass. They include:

Reservoirs that double as recreation centers.

Farmland that is assessed at a lower rate to encourage agriculture.

Transit corridors, including Interstates 5, 8, 15 and 805, state Routes 52, 54, 56 and 163 and surface streets such as Midway Drive, Pacific Highway and Harbor Drive that generally follow Nolen's circulation plan.

Nolen's belief in the planning process today has become a citizen-driven business with dozens of officially recognized community groups that are invited to review local development proposals.

But as the fight over developer Douglas F. Manchester's Pacific Gateway proposal for the foot of Broadway shows, controversy still swirls around key elements of the Nolen Plan, especially when it comes to the waterfront.

Meanwhile, another city is getting ready to mark a planning milestone that has shaped it for nearly 100 years.

One hundred groups in Chicago have signed up to mark the 100th anniversary of that city's famous 1909 plan by Daniel Burnham and Edward H. Bennett (www.planofchicago2009.org).

But the man who had a vision for San Diego that came before Chicago's plan rates barely a mention here in the public realm, with not even a committee appointed to mark his legacy.

A month after Nolen died in March 1937 at age 67, the San Diego Planning Commission voted to rename Harbor Drive, one of his key ideas, after him.

If you don't see his name while driving along the bayfront, it's because the city's sign makers are still standing by for the proper work order.


■Smokestacks and Geraniums is a monthly look at growth and development issues as they relate to historic trends in San Diego. The name is derived from a 1917 San Diego mayoral campaign pitting quick-fix forces against advocates of long-term planning.

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