

# Chester Rapkin: Planner, Teacher, Scholar

**Eugenie Ladner Birch**

"The seminal thinkers of the profession are now largely historical figures, few 'heroes' have emerged to replace them," Michael P. Brooks recently wrote (Brooks 1988). Brooks is unduly alarmist. Significant figures like Daniel Burnham and Rexford Tugwell have their counterparts today. But these contemporary planners are different. They do not espouse exaggerated visions nor call brashly for revolutionary changes. American life also is different. Big cities are no longer novel nor is the economy emerging from a major depression. The country now is dealing with seemingly intransigent issues like the underclass and runaway metropolitan growth and adjusting to major industrial restructuring.

Planners have a different world to work in and indeed, planners work differently in that world. They help communities slowly through collaboration with many constituencies, brokering—not defining—solutions. In this world, new kinds of heroes emerge. They do not stand ready with pat answers but use their expertise to forge and refine programs to meet today's needs. These heroes are not so grand nor prepossessing as the earlier ones. As they work, they are less noticeable than their predecessors but they are no less important. They have vision but it is tempered by expertise and realism born of experience. Their vision is not brash, it is possible. Who are these heroes of our age? They can be found. They can be measured against definitions of profession and of planning.

Professionals have several attributes. They possess expertise that they gained systematically and that they extend and pass on to their successors. They are concerned with the public interest and subscribe to the ethics used to regulate practice. Planners act to "advance the art and science of planning and foster the activity of planning—physical, economic, and social—at the local, state and regional levels" (American Planning Association and American Institute of Certified Planners 1988). Today's planning heroes meet those tests. Preeminent among them is Chester Rapkin.

Chester Rapkin has more than fulfilled the criteria of the planning professional. Not only does he possess expertise—a deep, technical knowledge of housing, transportation, land use, and the planning process—and a comprehensive vision of how to apply this knowledge, but also he has taught several generations of masters and doctoral candidates, imbuing them with a strong sense of the public interest (including



**Chester Rapkin**

an appreciation of definitional difficulties) and with the example of how to engage honorably in practice.

Chester Rapkin appeared on the planning scene more than 30 years ago, a new Ph.D degree in hand from Columbia, a soon-to-be-published dissertation, *Urban Traffic: A Function of Land Use* (Mitchell and Rapkin 1954), which would transform transportation planning. He embarked on a teaching career that would take him over the next three decades to the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, and Princeton University. During that time he would teach hundreds of students, more than 70 of them doctoral candidates, probably about 15 percent of all planning doctorates earned during that period. "Chet was a great teacher," one remembered several years later. "It wasn't only that he could excite your mind, but his style [was] warm, earthy, funny, and ethnic in the best sense" (Albert Guttenberg, personal communication).

---

*Birch, AICP, was one of Chester Rapkin's Ph.D students at Columbia University. She is editor-designate of the Journal of the American Planning Association.*

When Rapkin went to the University of Pennsylvania for his first teaching assignment, he was not an inexperienced graduate but a veteran of public agencies—the Federal Home Loan Bank Administration, the National Bureau of Economic Research, and the National Housing Agency. After graduating New York's City College in 1939 he had not entered graduate training directly, but got hands-on experience in the intricacies of housing finance as he dealt with mortgages, FHA insurance, construction costs, and foreclosure procedures. In that way, his expertise became rooted in the everyday workings of the urban real estate market and was sustained in his succeeding graduate work. He built his vision for better communities on that solid base. Without that firm technical foundation he might not have been able to make his important contributions to housing and urban renewal programs of the 1960s, nor would he have been able to ask the incisive questions about discrimination and equity that would drive much of his later work.

In those first years at Penn and later at Columbia and Princeton, he taught courses in urban economics, metropolitan structural analysis, and planning methods, and participated in the ever-present studios. At the same time, as head of the Urban Studies Group at Penn's Institute for Environmental Studies and later as director of Columbia's Institute of Urban Environment, he had a research schedule suitable for a full time consultant. What was unique about his work, then and now, was his ability to turn what could have been prosaic, dust-collecting reports into significant pace-setting studies—ones that changed planning practice.

In a study that the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority commissioned, *Residential Renewal in the Urban Core* (1959), he and William G. Grigsby not only provided specific data for the Friendly City's public officials to use to create the highly successful Society Hill project, but they also illuminated a concern of more general interest: how to formulate a renewal program capable of countering market trends. Focusing on the demand component for central city homes, Rapkin and his associates demonstrated how to undertake a small-area market study—up to that time residential analysis had focused on whole cities or metropolitan regions—and how to measure consumer preferences for housing types and specific locations within a city. Those innovations, as well as those he developed for assessing other types of land uses, led officials in several cities, notably Pittsburgh, New Haven, New York, Boston, Syracuse and Honolulu, to seek his advice in similar matters. In all, Rapkin would complete over a hundred major reports for those and other jurisdictions.

Rapkin's interest extended well beyond traditional real estate analysis to include broad social issues.

Intuitively and experientially, he saw that racial discrimination would become a critical urban concern as demographic trends revealed the growing concentration of minorities, particularly blacks, in the central cities. In *The Demand for Housing in Racially Mixed Areas, A Study in Neighborhood Change* (Rapkin and Grigsby 1960), he studied residential transition from an economics perspective, probably for the first time, focusing on the relatively frictionless entry of blacks into certain white neighborhoods, and explained under what circumstances black home ownership caused an increase in land values instead of the commonly expected decrease. (His optimistic prediction that stable mixed residential districts could emerge needs a followup today.) Several years later, however, in "Price Discrimination Against Negroes in the Rental Housing Market," he had a less sanguine message as he demonstrated how, at all levels, blacks paid more for rental housing than whites (Rapkin 1966).

Rapkin revealed an early concern about the residential mortgage insurance system's ability to withstand harsh economic reverses, an ominous reality today. With Ernest M. Fisher he conducted the first actuarial study of the adequacy of the FHA mortgage insurance reserves to cover defaults and losses in the event of a major financial contraction. The results appeared in *The Mutual Mortgage Insurance Fund* (1956). Rapkin later undertook a more advanced analysis for the Mortgage Guarantee Insurance Corporation, a private mortgage insurance company, which was the first to compete with the FHA and which dominated the industry at that time. Those studies constituted the foundation for future exploration of the subject and opened an area that since has proven to be of crucial importance.

Running counter to popular positions was a Rapkin trait. In a 1963 report to the New York City Planning Commission, for example, his detailed surveys and reasoned analyses convinced decision makers to hold off on demolition and clearance and to preserve the old loft district of lower Manhattan. Twenty years later, its cast iron architecture intact and its loft spaces highly sought after, that area, now a national historic landmark, thrives as a center of art, entertainment, and small industry.

Besides effectively combining research and teaching, Rapkin held important public positions. As staff director of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Task Force on Urban Problems, he put forth the framework for the Demonstration Cities and Metropolitan Development ("Model Cities") Act and worked on the organizational scheme for the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development. Later, as one of the seven commissioners of city planning for New York City, he saw the city through some of the toughest decisions to be made between 1969—the year of the master

plan—and 1976—through the fiscal crisis. He dealt with incentive zoning, the transfer of development rights, and the implications of the changing federal aid formula. Along with today's chair of the New York City Planning Commission, Sylvia Deutsch, he struggled to find innovative legal solutions to the knotty private property issues in which the Big Apple seemed to specialize, among which were how to save the private parks of Tudor City, threatened with conversion to apartments, and how to contain the growing pornographic industry in the Times Square area.

Rapkin ranged into the international arena as well. Recognition of his expertise in housing and land value analysis led to consultantancies with the Singapore urban renewal and development project, the city of Melbourne, the National Capital Development Commission of Australia, the Puerto Rican Planning Board, and the Korean Planners' Association. His longest lasting relationship, however, has been with Israel. Since 1964 he has been a visiting professor to the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology six times, and an advisor to the Ministry of Housing and to the Weizmann Institute. He has been instrumental in the creation of central city urban renewal programs featuring rehabilitation with little displacement and with social as well as physical assistance for residents.

Even as he retires, Rapkin will continue to break new ground. Irreplaceable at Princeton, he will, as professor emeritus, offer planning courses in the School of Architecture this year. In addition, he will continue his consulting schedule—this time in China, advising the government on how they can convert their communally held urban land to a free market price system.

Almost 20 years ago, Mel Scott wrote that Chester Rapkin "objected to the tendency among planners to exaggerate what they did not know and to overlook the considerable volume and variety of research studies already accumulated." Rapkin, he noted, believed that "research could provide foresight and hindsight—increase the sensitivity to the 'interaction of subtle forces and make possible more intelligent public policy and decisions'" (Scott 1969). Rapkin's life work proves that assertion in many ways. He has contributed substantive research. He has participated in the public decision making process. He has passed his considerable knowledge and wisdom to hundreds of students and colleagues. He has lived and is living a life of thought and action in the service of urban planning. Clearly, he is a planning hero.

To commemorate Chester Rapkin's retirement, which characteristically will be as active as his earlier years, a number of his students and colleagues have worked to create this *Festschrift*. In the essays that follow, the contributors—who have had various connections with him at different times and places—celebrate some of

his concerns. They demonstrate some of the knowledge and wisdom they received from their teacher, colleague, and friend.

The first selection, "Notes on a Planner's Career," presents three pieces that interpret aspects of Rapkin's life and call attention to some of his contributions. In "Chester Rapkin, Policy Maker" Robert C. Wood and Hans B. C. Spiegel evaluate his work on Johnson's Task Force on Urban Problems. In "From Economist to Preservationist," Margaret Latimer reveals the critical importance of his SoHo study and presents an interesting attribution for the name SoHo. In "Price Discrimination Revisited: Enough Progress?" Grace Milgram updates Rapkin's landmark essay, "Price Discrimination Against Negroes in the Rental Housing Market." Her findings are surprising.

Paul Niebanck's essay, "Planning Education: Unleashing the Future," is particularly suitable for this special issue. Niebanck is the planner's de Tocqueville. He has traveled, observed, and analyzed in a fashion never attempted before. While his informal style belies the vigorous thought behind his essay, his optimism, excitement, and enthusiasm are inescapable. His prescriptions are provocative and should stimulate a lively debate about planning education.

Jennifer Wolch, Michael Dear, and Andrea Akita reflect Rapkin's interest in housing problems in "Explaining Homelessness"; they provide a comprehensive treatment of the nation's major concern about shelter. Their broad interpretation of the causes of homelessness is the first attempt to understand the problem within a trilevel context: the American economy, the housing market, and individual behavior patterns. Clearly, this analysis will assist planners and policy makers in fashioning appropriate responses.

Finally, Chester Rapkin's internationalism, especially his interest in Israeli urban renewal policy, is enhanced by the research of Rachele Alterman and by Naomi Carmon and Moshe Hill. In "Neighborhood Rehabilitation Without Relocation or Gentrification" Carmon and Hill document the history of Israel's Project Renewal from its inception in 1976 to the present. (That program, modeled after the American Model Cities efforts that Rapkin advanced, currently encompasses 90 neighborhoods and about 15 percent of the country's population, some 600,000 people.) They argue that applying lessons from prior experience can result in successful programs for distressed urban neighborhoods. In a companion article, "Implementing Decentralization for Neighborhood Uplift, The Secret Ingredients of Success in Israel's Project Renewal," Alterman isolates the factors that promote and those that inhibit decentralization and argues that the transferability of that knowledge merits further study.

These offerings exemplify the breadth and depth of the interest stimulated by Chester Rapkin, the planner,

teacher, and scholar. They represent a special continuum as they pass on knowledge and, I expect, increase the readers' "sensitivity to subtle forces and make possible intelligent public policy and decision-making" (Rapkin 1959).

## References

- American Planning Association and American Institute of Certified Planners. 1988. Official Statement of Purpose.
- Brooks, Michael P. 1988. Four Critical Junctures in the History of the Urban Planning Profession: An Exercise in Hindsight. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 54, 2: 241-48.
- Guttenberg, Albert. 1987. Letter to the author, June 9.
- Mitchell, Robert B., and Chester Rapkin. 1954. *Urban Traffic, A Function of Land Use*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rapkin, Chester. 1959. Research in Planning. P. 237 in *Planning*, 1958. Chicago: American Society of Planning Officials.
- . 1963. *The South Houston Industrial Area—The Economic Significance of Firms, the Physical Quality of Buildings, and the Real Estate Market in Old Loft Section of Lower Manhattan*. New York: City Planning Commission.
- . 1966. Price Discrimination against Negroes in the Rental Housing Market. Pp. 335-45 in *Essays in Urban Land Economics*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- and William G. Grigsby. 1959. *Residential Renewal in the Urban Core*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 1960. *The Demand for Housing in Racially Mixed Areas. A Study of the Nature of Neighborhood Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Scott, Mel. 1969. *American City Planning Since 1893*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## TWO CENTURIES OF AMERICAN PLANNING

edited by Daniel Schaffer

When nineteenth-century urban planners first laid out New York City's famed gridiron street pattern in 1811, they at once helped to assure the city's unrivaled economic growth and to condemn thousands of its citizens to life in crowded slums. The planners' dilemma — how to balance the demands of economic development with those of social equity — forms the guiding theme for this collection of pieces on planning written by some of the discipline's most prominent practitioners and theoreticians.

*Two Centuries of American Planning* traces the conflicts and contradictions specific to this field, from the beginnings of urbanization in the 1800s through the Reagan years and beyond. The planners' successes and failures offer valuable insights to students, professionals, and all whose job it is to know the past in order better to plan our cities' future.

\$48.50 hardcover

\$14.95 paperback

## THE NEW URBAN LANDSCAPE

*The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America*

David Schuyler

"Beautifully written, carefully argued, and richly documented, [this] is the best book yet to appear on the origins of the magnificent public spaces which so dramatically transformed American cities in the nineteenth century." —Kenneth T. Jackson, Columbia University

David Schuyler analyzes efforts by nineteenth century civic leaders to define a new urban culture by creating open recreational and residential areas for their growing cities. His detailed and sweeping account of the emergence of a new urban landscape is now available in paperback.

*New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History*  
Thomas Bender, Consulting Editor

\$29.50 hardcover

\$10.95 paperback

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS  
701 West 40th Street, Suite 275, Baltimore, Maryland 21211