

ACSP Distinguished Educator, 2009: Eugenie Ladner Birch

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This essay is the twenty-third in a series on the recipients of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning Distinguished Educator Award, ACSP's highest honor. The essays appear in the order the honorees received the award.

Becoming a city planner was something of a happy accident for Genie Birch. A *cum laude* graduate of Bryn Mawr majoring in history and Latin American studies, she was awarded a Fulbright to spend a year in Cuenca, Ecuador, and spent the summer after graduation at Columbia University brushing up on her Spanish. Walking across campus she spotted a poster promoting city planning as a career and out of curiosity stopped by the program's office where she met Charles Abrams, who had worked in several Latin American countries as well as the United States. He had two pieces of advice: look at housing conditions in the large cities, and after her Fulbright, enroll in their Master of City Planning program. Genie did both, shifting her field studies to Quito, Ecuador, and earning an MCP degree at Columbia. She stayed on at Columbia as a researcher at its Institute for Urban Environment before continuing for her PhD there. Like Abrams, Genie has enjoyed a career in research, teaching, writing and civic activism both in the United States and abroad.

Genie was blessed by having wonderful mentors. At Bryn Mawr, Dorothy Marshall, the provost, and two history professors, Barbara Miller Lane and Mary Maples Dunn taught her how to write history and became role models. Mary Dunn, who later became president of Smith College, had a baby over Thanksgiving break and was back teaching the next week, which now seems astounding but the message to her students took from it was, "OK, we can do that . . ." Her PhD advisor at Columbia, Ken Jackson, honed her skills by critiquing everything she wrote, offering rules of thumb about writing that have stuck with her. Chester Rapkin taught her about housing as she worked as his research assistant.

Her dissertation on *Edith Elmer Wood and the Genesis of Liberal Housing Policy* combined all of these interests.

Growing up in Cheshire, Connecticut, and spending many of her summers with family in St. Cloud, Minnesota, she learned to love the life of towns. She raised her family in Manhattan while she taught at Hunter College, a short walk from her home. At Hunter, she learned how the city functioned through her research and student projects, including two award-winning studios on Central and East Harlem. During her years as a professor and chair of Hunter's planning program she educated many planners and urbanists that included Mitchell Silver, past president of the American Planning Association and most recently Parks Commissioner in New York City. Silver wrote, "I believe a great planner must have hindsight, insight and foresight. That is the gift Genie helped me discover as a student and professional planner. Genie gave me a love for planning history and an inquisitive mind . . ."

Genie's interest in women in housing continued at Hunter, and she co-taught a course on the subject with Donna Shalala that she turned into a book, *The Unsheltered Woman* (Birch 1985), that incorporates her work on Edith Wood. She developed a passion for educating professionals beyond planners who wanted to understand the urban context—journalists, police officials, government employees and those headed to the nonprofit sector. Genie mentored Jane Margolies, bound for a career in journalism, who commented,

I loved her course on the history of urban planning. She showed a genuine interest in her students and took me under her wing. . . . and recruited me to help with some of the many editorial endeavors she was involved in. . . . When I began working for the *New York Times* and needed input from an urban planning expert for a story about building in New York City I knew exactly who to contact.

Genie also became a civic activist, with leadership roles in many of the city's important institutions. She served on the New York City Planning Commission just as the charter

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change made it more powerful, chaired the Municipal Arts Society, the city's oldest guardian of the public realm, and was a member of the jury to select the designers of the World Trade Center in 2002. She is currently on the board of the Regional Plan Association. She chaired the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning, the Planning Accreditation Board, the Society for American City and Regional Planning, and the International Planning History Society. She also served as co-editor, *Journal of the American Planning Association*; editor, *Planning Theory and Practice*; and as an editorial board member of virtually every other publication in the planning field.

When I became dean of the design school at the University of Pennsylvania in 1996, I faced the daunting task of reinventing the once-distinguished city and regional planning program that had dwindled to near oblivion. Two years earlier, the trustees of the university had voted to terminate the program. But a new university president, Judith Rodin, had arrived and shared my belief that having a strong program in planning was not only critical to the school but also to her agenda of revitalizing West Philadelphia. I had a license to recruit the best person in the country to create a new and effective program, attuned to the times.

I couldn't have been more pleased when Genie Birch expressed interest in the position. She understood the challenge, and more important, the potential of creating a program that combined theory and practice in the best tradition of Ben Franklin's charge to the university he founded. Genie set about to attract a faculty that would bring intellectual rigor and excitement to the program. Two professors of practice were soon recruited, Robert Yaro, president of the Regional Plan Association, and Jonathan Barnett, urban design writer and practitioner whose books had shaped the field. Other faculty were also added, growing in stature as they helped shape the department's new direction. It took countless hours of debate under Genie's leadership to forge a new intellectual direction and decide on a curriculum that integrated the contributions of new and older faculty. Enrollments increased and became more diverse, attracted by the newfound energy of the department's activities.

For fifteen years, Genie Birch, who was named as the Nussdorf Professor of Urban Research, taught the introductory course for all MCP students, immersing them in the history of planning ideas, and offering them a window on the many ways that they could improve urban life. Her enthusiasm for cities was infectious, and students admired her encyclopedic knowledge. She taught more advanced courses on the evolution of global cities, sustainable development, and financing cities in the developing world. She often finds grant money to take students to cities in the developing world, preparing proposals that are presented to local officials. The experience is often transformational.

Educating doctoral students has become central to Genie's teaching. She headed the graduate group, charged with overseeing doctoral students working on urban issues across the

school, attracting and mentoring students in diverse areas. The students saw her as a model for their careers, as Amanda Ashley, now program head at Boise State University writes,

Genie was the first person who asked me to explain the 'so-what' of my research interests. Her commitment and enthusiasm to doing work that had some kind of real-world meaning and contribution was inspirational and compelling. Seeing the model of a public academic fueled the way that I designed my own career and professional aspirations.

Genie was especially interested in students who wished to break new ground, like Catherine Brinkley, now of the University of California, Davis, who had trained both as a veterinary clinician and an urban planner and wanted to tackle the issue of food planning. Catherine traveled with Genie to Nairobi, Kenya, for a UN-sponsored program of sustainable development and joined her delegation to the World Urban Forum in Rio de Janeiro. They also worked together to create an international conference on feeding cities, sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation, that yielded several white papers and publications and served as a springboard for Catherine's NSF Career Award. Catherine wrote that

There were vocal detractors who said I was taking on far too much personally by having children during my eight years as a VMD-PhD student. Genie was not one of those detractors. She was incredibly enthusiastic, because she had also done so much as a mother and an academic.

After ten years at the helm of Penn's city and regional planning department, Genie stepped down but did not slow down. She had broader ambitions, both academically and professionally. Five years earlier, she had collaborated with Susan Wachter of the Wharton School to found the Penn Institute for Urban Research (PennIUR), with an agenda of coalescing the faculty working on urban topics across the university's twelve schools. They organized successful symposiums on topical issues, each resulting in a book that included *Rebuilding Urban Places After Disasters* (Birch and Wachter 2006), *Growing Greener Cities* (Birch and Wachter 2008), *Global Urbanization* (Birch and Wachter 2011), and *Neighborhood and Life Chances* (Birch, Newburger, and Wachter 2013). They also persuaded the University of Pennsylvania Press to create a book series, *The City in the Twenty-first Century*, and served as co-editors with more than forty books released over the past fifteen years. PennIUR has become a model cross-disciplinary center, attracting post-doc students, research funding and private gifts, hosting regular symposiums, seminars and visiting scholars, and supporting the work of professional and doctoral students from the university's diverse schools. Genie has also continued with her own research and publications, including co-editing the most recent edition of the

International City Management Association's "Green Book," *Local Planning* (Hack et al. 2009), recently republished in Chinese for an audience in China.

Freed of administrative responsibilities, Genie has regained the flexibility to pursue the international development issues which originally attracted her to planning. She has been active in the UN's activities leading up to the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, which she reported on in her article, "Midterm Report: Will Habitat III Make a Difference to Global Urban Development?" (Birch 2016). Currently, she serves as president of the General Assembly of Partners (GAP) that focuses on expanding the participation of individuals and public interest groups promoting sustainable urban development in UN programs. She devotes her time to the World Economic Forum, as a member of its Global Futures Council on Cities and Urbanization. But she also enjoys providing direct assistance to cities in the developing world, including Accra, Ghana, and Freetown, Sierra Leone, where she is working with the mayors' offices on financing mechanisms for infrastructure investment and slum upgrading.

Throughout her career Genie's husband Robert Birch has been supportive of her peripatetic professional life and more than willingly assumed family responsibilities. Both grew up in small cities and share the feeling that such places have been undervalued in the current metropolitan pattern. I was not surprised to learn that they have created a foundation to support a new Center for Study of Small Towns and Cities, that will be located in Boonton, New Jersey, where Bob grew up. Its home will be in the restored Victorian Maxfield firehouse and council chambers, that will include a library and archive, places for visiting fellows to work and, of course, places to bring scholars and officials together for meetings and conferences. I expect to hear a lot more about the center in the future.

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