

Ian McHarg, 80, Architect Who Valued a Site's Natural Features

By **ANDREW C. REVKIN** MARCH 12, 2001

Ian L. McHarg, a landscape architect, planner and teacher whose passion for meshing communities and ecology inspired scores of successors, died on March 5 in Chester, Pa., near Philadelphia. He was 80.

His most enduring contribution to the field, many colleagues say, is his 1969 book, "Design With Nature" (John Wiley & Sons), which urged landscape planners to conform to ecology, not compete with it. The book, which has sold more than 250,000 copies, was compared by Lewis Mumford to the environmental clarion calls of Thoreau and Rachel Carson.

Mr. McHarg, an emeritus professor at the University of Pennsylvania, founded the university's department of landscape architecture and regional planning 46 years ago and ran it for three decades.

The program attracted graduate students from around the world who were lured by his environmental approach to design, which he conveyed with a memorable mix of polished urbanity and missionary zeal.

He used any medium available, including books and television, to impart his essential message: that no human action, be it building a highway, city, condominium or park, should proceed without a study of its suitability for the topography, vegetation, waterways, wildlife and other natural features of a site. In refining a method of assessing all aspects of a plot of land by using a "layer cake" of stacked transparent Mylar maps, he foreshadowed procedures that are now a universal part of the environmental impact reviews required before a construction project proceeds.

He was also an early advocate of restricting plantings to native species, both for philosophical reasons and because introducing a foreign species can sometimes

disrupt the ecology of an area.

His work, writings and ideas won him many awards, including the National Medal of Art in 1990 and, last year, the \$480,000 Japan Prize in city planning.

But many of his students maintain that his greatest legacy was not his method, or even his seminal book; it was his passion for respecting the living land and his volcanic determination to brand successive generations of planners and landscape architects with the same ethic.

"He was a classic old Scottish Bible thumper, but his religion was the environment," said Edmund D. Hollander, a landscape architect in Manhattan and a McHarg protégé. "He was an apostle for the planet."

Ian Lennox McHarg was born in Clydebank, Scotland, and was raised in Glasgow, where, as he stated in his 1996 memoir, "A Quest for Life: An Autobiography" (John Wiley & Sons), at the age of 10 he was given to taking 30-mile hikes from the city into the countryside.

Along the way he experienced the sharp clash between grimy industrial cityscapes and rolling, rural greenery, quickly developing a passion for the latter. Combining his love of the outdoors with a penchant for drawing, he gravitated toward a career in landscape architecture, which was then mainly a genteel pursuit involving formal estate gardens.

He served in the British Army from 1939 to 1946, sabotaging German installations behind the lines in Italy and reaching the rank of major. After the war he enrolled at Harvard and earned three degrees in landscape architecture and city planning.

While in Cambridge, he contracted tuberculosis, which, along with his lifelong habit of smoking cigarettes, led to persistent health problems.

With his degrees, he returned to Scotland to pursue his design career, but he soon moved back to the United States for good, settling at the University of Pennsylvania and starting its design program in 1954.

In 1959 Mr. McHarg's ecological focus intensified when he created a course titled "Man and the Environment," a wide-ranging exploration of the relationship between human evolution and natural history.

Each semester Mr. McHarg gave the opening and culminating lectures, but mainly the class was a series of interviews he conducted with a parade of geologists, botanists, anthropologists and other scientists.

The popular course led in 1960 and 1961 to a 12-part series on CBS, "The House We Live In," in which Mr. McHarg, in his irrepressible style -- draped in cigarette smoke, sniffing and digressing -- prodded insights from the likes of Margaret Mead and Erich Fromm.

In 1960 he helped found the Philadelphia landscape firm of Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd. In his practice, Mr. McHarg pursued dozens of projects, including regional plans for Denver, Lower Manhattan and Baltimore County in Maryland, as well as the design of the Woodlands New Community, a planned neighborhood near Houston that was acclaimed as an example of environmentally balanced development.

He had a penchant for overreaching that was both a key to his genius and, occasionally, a curse, many colleagues said. He sometimes became involved in complicated, costly projects, including Pardisan Nature Park, an environmental theme park developed for the Shah of Iran in Tehran.

His visionary zeal was generally not matched by business acumen, and he ran up debts through much of his life. When he received the Japan Prize last year, he told an interviewer that "it might just be possible now to avoid dying bankrupt."

But he did pass on his fiery convictions to a generation of disciples, many of whom have gone on to lead successful firms and teaching programs. Niall G. Kirkwood, director of the center for technology and environment at the Harvard graduate school of design, is one of many former students who say Mr. McHarg changed their lives and work.

Mr. Kirkwood said he read "Design With Nature" at the age of 32 when he was a practicing architect in England. "I sold everything and left London to study under Ian," he said.

On field trips to the New Jersey Pine Barrens or other woodlands, Mr. Kirkwood recalled, Mr. McHarg never adopted the scuffed-boots style of a tree hugger, instead sticking to his tweed jackets and chain-smoked cigarettes -- even as he directed his students' gazes to some particular patch of tree bark or rock.

Another constant was irreverence. Several of his students recalled the pleasure they took upon hearing that he had once addressed a gathering of Fortune 500 executives and told them the time had come for American industry to be "toilet trained."

Mr. McHarg is survived by his wife, Carol Smyser McHarg of Unionville, Pa.; their sons, Ian William and Andrew Maxwell McHarg; two sons from an earlier marriage, Alistair Craig and Malcolm Lennox McHarg; and two sisters in Scotland, Moira Lennox Watson and Joyce Harriet MacKenzie.

Even as Mr. McHarg's lungs failed him over the past year, he continued to think big.

"The last thing he said to me, last April or so, was, 'I want to do this big study, a geophysical inventory for the whole globe, the world,' " Mr. Kirkwood said. "He was still dreaming far beyond his circumstances."

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