

Thomas William Mackesey

November 28, 1908 — May 2, 1976

Professor Thomas W. Mackesey, whose contributions to Cornell as a teacher, colleague, and administrator fill the years between 1938 and 1976, died in Ithaca at the age of sixty-seven on Sunday, May 2, 1976. Professor Mackesey is remembered for his inspiring teaching, his brilliant administrative work, his quick good humor and hearty cheer. He will be recalled fondly by his students, his colleagues, and his fellow administrators.

Professor Mackesey was a shaker and a mover who got things done by force of reason, quiet persistence, and principled compromise. He was a builder of institutions and a planner of cities, both here and abroad. At Cornell he left his mark on the campus by creating the conditions under which the best architects of the nation found opportunities to express themselves in buildings reflecting the exciting and sometimes disturbing forms of contemporary America. Tom led the planning, development, and construction of literally tens of millions of dollars of new physical facilities during a period of tremendous University growth and expansion. He did so with keen insight and admirable sensitivity.

Born in Boston in 1908, Professor Mackesey received a professional degree in architecture and, from M.I.T., one of the first graduate professional degrees offered in city planning in the nation. When Tom arrived at Cornell in 1938, the Carnegie Foundation had provided funds for the establishment of a graduate program in city and regional planning. Tom Mackesey worked actively in the development of coursework and the creation of the excellent library collection in planning. The graduate planning program also thrived under his direction, growing from a handful of students in the thirties and forties to over one hundred thirty graduate students.

In addition, Professor Mackesey was from the first active in the administration of the college serving for many years as secretary of the faculty. In 1950 he was appointed acting dean of the College of Architecture and in the following year was named dean. His administration was a period of growth for the college programs in architecture and art as well as planning. He brought to Cornell a number of excellent faculty members and was active in building a better graduate component in all three fields. It was also under his leadership that the visiting critic program, which has proved so valuable a part of the undergraduate curriculum in architecture, was initiated and proved.

Professor Mackesey also had a distinguished career as a professional planner and researcher. He has worked on a number of projects in New York State and abroad. He initiated interdisciplinary research in housing and urban development through the Center for Housing and Environmental Studies in which he led the work of

establishment and recruitment of its first director. Subsequently he was the principal or coinvestigator in a number of major research studies carried out within the center. He was a member of the team working with Professor Belcher advising the Brazilian government on the selection of the site for the new national capital of Brasilia, and he was a principal consultant on campus planning for the National University in Laos.

When Professor Mackesey retired from the deanship of the college in 1960 he planned to return to teaching but after a sabbatic leave during which he served as visiting professor at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen, Denmark, he returned to the campus and was nominated and elected dean of the faculty. In this post he served until 1963 when President James Perkins asked him to serve as vice provost for planning and subsequently vice president for planning. By firmly establishing certain fundamental campus planning processes and principles, he contributed wisely and permanently to the evolution of the unique Cornell environment. As Cornell's master builder in this modern era of campus development, he was often subjected to criticism, which never left him bitter. For as Deane Malott once observed, "Tom has been praised, kidded, prodded, cajoled, vilified, and glorified . . . (because at heart we are all architects and planners) but through it all he has come triumphant, sure of his facts, willing to listen, his humor undaunted, his patience enduring."

Yet it is not only the buildings for which Tom has such a major responsibility that we shall remember him, but for the more important structure that he made of his life. Tom was a gentle man. He cared for the feelings of others, respecting and responding to them with tenderness and understanding.

His personal gentleness, however, did not lead him into soft solutions for tough problems. He possessed the ability and the confidence to make decisions on complex issues. No one ever had to guess how Tom Mackesey stood on controversial matters. He laid down the principles from which he drew his conclusions, stated his position, and argued forcefully and clearly for what he believed. Yet, if a decision was reached contrary to his opinion, he did his utmost to carry it out. He was a modest victor and a graceful loser. Tom bore no grudges. One could disagree with him, even sharply, with the sure knowledge that no part of such conflict would be carried over to other subjects or relationships.

Professor Mackesey always maintained his interest and, to the extent he could, participation in teaching while he served in various administrative capacities. He continued his scholarship particularly in his special interest— the history of city planning and building. Professor Mackesey looked back only to learn from the past. In his popular course on the history of city planning he shared these insights with several generations of appreciative students.

He was a masterful lecturer on this subject, tracing the great accomplishments of city building in ways that gave them fresh meaning and demonstrated how the lessons of history could be applied in modern practice.

Of his teaching ability in other courses, hundreds of alumni can testify to the impact he made on them both personally and intellectually. He took the efforts of students seriously, reacting thoughtfully and conscientiously to the results of their work. He found ways to criticize without wounding, to disagree while finding merit, and to patiently lead the student to reconsider his or her conclusions more carefully. Those fortunate enough to study under Tom thus learned to use their minds for something other than a place to store their instructor's knowledge.

Professor Mackesey wore his many honors lightly and modestly. His elevation to the rank of fellow of the American Institute of Architects could not have failed to gratify him, but it was surely the lively and sentimental party marking his retirement that moved him most. It was an occasion when, as Deane Malott noted in presenting him with three volumes of admiring letters from friends throughout the world, there was affection "in every line and word." His friends' affection remains constant, and our respect grows as his legacy to the University is now acknowledged.

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