



## **William G. McMinn**

August 21, 1931 – August 21, 2020

William G. McMinn, Dean of the College of Architecture, Art and Planning (AAP) at Cornell University from 1984 to 1996, died in Asheville, North Carolina, on August 21, 2020, at the age of 89.

"Bill McMinn's contributions to the stature of the college cannot be overstated," says Meejin Yoon, Gale and Ira Drukier Dean of AAP. "As a founder of the Cornell in Rome program that has grown to become a vital component of our architecture, art, and planning students' education, he enriched the lives of so many. Bill was a prolific practitioner, educator, and scholar of design and though his expansive career extends well beyond our college, his influence continues to be felt at the core of our values and culture at AAP."

In addition to the founding of Cornell in Rome, Bill McMinn's accomplishments as dean include the establishment of the undergraduate program in the Department of City and Regional Planning. And, as Trustee Emeritus Robert H. Abrams observes, "Bill had a significant role in the establishment of the Cornell Baker Program in Real Estate. He welcomed the concept of an interdisciplinary program housed in City and Regional Planning with courses contributed from several colleges across the university. I doubt the program could have launched or survived without his enthusiastic support and encouragement." McMinn also strengthened many of AAP's graduate programs with increased support funding and helped launch a five-year fundraising campaign focused on facilities, endowments, and the upgrade of educational technology.

Bill McMinn's deep attachment to Rome developed when he had a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in 1982. When he became dean at AAP, he formed an international college board of advisors to set up the Cornell in Rome program, which opened in 1986. Bill gave the program his careful oversight, navigating various crises, and leaving it with a solid foundation for the future. As Professor Emeritus of planning William Goldsmith observes: "When the Rome program felt seriously threatened, Bill bluntly announced an imminent shutdown. As he anticipated, students were outraged and "occupied" the dome gallery space. What could a poor

dean do? He immediately submitted to "negotiation," the three department chairs formed a governing committee, and as Bill also anticipated, problems were quickly ironed out, and the program thrived."

Bill was firmly convinced that Rome, this most ancient and complicated of cities, is the ideal laboratory for the disciplines of architecture, art, and planning. Many colleagues, recalling Bill's contributions, concur that his founding and support of Cornell in Rome was a capital achievement. Architect Robert Joy, a former member of the Dean's Advisory Council, recalls, "What I remember most about Bill were his warmth and boundless energy. His love of Rome was infectious. You couldn't help but be swept away by his enthusiasm." For Victor Kord, former chair of the Department of Art, "Cornell in Rome owes its very existence to Bill's passion for all things Roman: its history, culture, and complexity. He wanted to share this with the students and faculty of the college." Don Greenberg, the Jacob Gould Schurman Professor of Computer Graphics shares, "I do believe that his most important contribution was the initiation of Cornell in Rome. I am sure that many of us who were able to take advantage of the program are thankful for its existence." Artist and Professor Emerita Kay WalkingStick recalls: "I remember that he was supportive of his faculty, he knew a bit about Cherokees (few people do) and he had a lovely elegance about him....he always seemed above the fray. What we truly shared was a deep love of Rome." Professor Emeritus in architecture Kent Hubbell shares: "I have fond memories of Bill McMinn that go back to 1993, when I returned to Cornell after 18 years at the University of Michigan. A true southern gentleman, he welcomed me back to Cornell, and provided warm support as I adjusted to Cornell and my new role as department chair." Urban designer and Professor Emeritus Roger Trancik joins the chorus: "Bill McMinn was an excellent professional administrator in his position as dean and at the same time a personable colleague, showing a high level of respect for the faculty. This was on full display in the Spring of 1991, during the Gulf War, one of the four semesters I taught at Cornell in Rome. He carefully weighed the various concerns and options and kept the program operating during this challenging time. Bill McMinn made a significant contribution to departmental collaboration and managing the Rome program. He should be highly recognized for this extremely successful endeavor."

Bill McMinn was born in Abilene, Texas, received his B.A. in 1952 and his B.Arch. in 1953 from Rice University, and his M.Arch. in 1954 from the University of Texas, Austin. He began his teaching career at Texas Tech University, moving on to Clemson University, Auburn University, and Louisiana State University.

He was the founding dean of the Mississippi State University School of Architecture from 1974 to 1984 when he joined Cornell as dean of AAP. Following his 12-year period at Cornell, he was named founding dean of the School of Architecture at Florida International University in 1997. At FIU, he initiated the international design competition that brought Bernard Tschumi to create the school's new building. Ever a proponent of study abroad programs, Bill noted that "the immersion into a foreign culture, even for a short time, provides an important measure of one's own values, [and an opportunity] to grow intellectually, professionally and personally."

In addition to his teaching and administrative career, Bill McMinn practiced professionally from 1968-71 in Asheville, North Carolina. He was appointed in 1980 to the National Architectural

Accrediting Board (NAAB), of which he became president three years later. During his tenure, NAAB procedures were reformed, and he chaired NAAB team reviews of 24 architecture programs.

Bill McMinn was selected as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects in 1980. In addition, he was the recipient of the ACSA's Distinguished Professor award in 1991.

Having retired from FIU in 2004, Bill McMinn was awarded in 2006 the Topaz Medallion for Excellence in Architectural Education by the AIA Board and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA). In nominating McMinn, John McRae, FAIA, stated, "Bill McMinn has, throughout his career, served as a strong bridge between practice and education. His vision has always been to provide a seamless transition between the two realms...with thoughtful, engaging, and productive action, while serving with humility and grace."

The Topaz Medallion jury commented: "The breadth of Bill McMinn's educational accomplishments demonstrates a level of continued excellence and innovation that is truly exceptional...Such a leader inspires not only students and faculty but the community. We have endless admiration for what he has done."

After his retirement from academic life, Bill McMinn continued to advise on projects and architectural design competitions. Settling in Asheville, Bill and his wife Joan continued to travel extensively, especially to the city they loved best, Roma.

Cornell architectural historian and Professor Emerita Mary Woods offers the following elegant synthesis: "Like so many American artists and architects, Bill McMinn was an Italophile. He founded AAP's now treasured Rome study program, projecting students and faculty into worlds beyond Ithaca. Bill created and nurtured programs in Texas, Mississippi, Ithaca, and Miami, Florida as well as Rome. Wherever he was, Bill always cut an elegant figure, evident in any photograph of him. This surely was yet another legacy of the many years he spent in his beloved Rome. When he and his wife Joan went to Florida International University in 1997, they fell in love with the city's diversity and cosmopolitanism. The main living space of their early Arquitectonica house was a perfect cube set in the lush greenery of Coconut Grove. It elegantly summarized the arc of Bill's many careers and passions: Renaissance geometries; tropical modernism; and Cornell's iconic design problem of the square."

Bill McMinn is survived by Joan, his wife of 64 years, along with their daughter, Tracey.

*Written by Jeffrey Blanchard and the McMinn Family*