John William Reps died Nov. 12, 2020 at his home in Ithaca, NY, after a six-month decline caused by a cystic mass in his brain. At the time of his death, he was Professor Emeritus in the Dept. of City and Regional Planning at Cornell University. Up until Cornell shutdown in March because of Covid-19, he went to his office in Sibley Hall every weekday, and was sometime even found there on weekends. John is survived by his daughter Martha of Ithaca, NY and son Thomas of Madison, WI; his wife of more than sixty years, Constance ("Connie") Peck Reps, died in 2009.

Born on Nov. 25, 1921 in St. Louis, John grew up in Springfield, MO, where his father ran a dry-goods store until it failed during the Great Depression. In high school, he competed on the swimming and tennis teams. He attended Dartmouth College, where he studied geography and planning; he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1942, and graduated summa cum laude in 1943. After graduation, he spent three years in the US Army Air Corps, rising to the rank of sergeant. During this time, he furthered his interest in planning by taking an evening course taught by the planning director of Denver, and a tough correspondence course through the Armed Services Institute. After the war, he studied planning at Cornell and—in the first of several stays abroad—at the Department of Civic Design, University of Liverpool. When he returned to America in Sept. 1947, he was appointed planning director of Broome County, NY.

In 1947, when John returned to his hometown and was pressed into giving a talk about the Marshall Plan, he met Connie Peck, then an Assistant Professor of French at Drury College in Springfield, MO. After their marriage in 1948, they lived in Binghamton, NY for two years. In 1950-51, they lived in England, where John was a Fulbright Student studying public administration at the London School of Economics and town planning at University College. In 1951, they moved to Ithaca when John joined the Cornell faculty. Three years later, they moved into the Ithaca home where they lived ever since.

John served on the Cornell faculty until Dec. 1986. He was Chair of City and Regional Planning from 1952 to 1964. For a few of those years, he was the only full-time faculty member, which, he said, "made faculty meetings a breeze." John started his career with an interest in land-use policy, particularly zoning and land-subdivision control. His most controversial proposal was to create metropolitan land corporations to manage the development of cities, particularly on their peripheries. When the plan was called socialistic, he defended his position by noting that both Washington, DC and Austin, TX had been built on land acquired by public authorities, and thus, "history would seem to indicate that what I am advocating is neither un-American nor un-Texan." Later, his interest shifted to city-planning history, which complemented his long-time passion for collecting antiquarian maps and city views -- a collection he had started during his first stay in England (enabled by the buying power in post-war England of his dollar-denominated stipend from the GI Bill).

During his career, John wrote fifteen books, starting in 1965 with the much-admired "The Making of Urban America," which surveyed conventional and unconventional plans for American cities, and traced the ideas behind them back to earlier ideas developed in Europe. A later book, "Cities of the American West," received the 1980 Beveridge Award from the American Historical Association for the year's best book on American History (despite the fact that John was not a trained historian). All his books were illustrated with his beloved old maps and views.
John took four sabbatical leaves from Cornell, including two year-long stays in Europe for the Reps family. Later sabbaticals took John and Connie back to London for a semester, and to the University of Georgia for a year, where he was the Bicentennial Distinguished Visiting Professor.

After retiring from the Cornell faculty, John kept a healthy mix of intellectual engagement and intellectual play. He made four multi-month visits to Australian universities, as well as shorter stays at institutes in the Soviet Union, China, and Hong Kong. Six of John's fifteen books were written post-retirement. Among them was "Canberra 1912," prompted by his discovery, during one of his Australian visits, of 47 of the 137 entries from the competition for the design of the Australian capital city, most of them unseen since the competition itself.

John was unusual in that he was a professor who never completed a Ph.D.; he did, however, receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska in 1985. John was awarded fellowships by the Guggenheim Foundation, Eisenhower Exchange, Fulbright Commission, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Australian National University. He received the biennial award for Distinguished Service to Education in Planning from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning. In 1996, the American Planning Association, citing him as the father of modern American city-planning history, designated him a Planning Pioneer. Shortly after John’s death, he was named the recipient of the 2021 Henry Hope Reed Award for “an individual working outside the practice of architecture who has supported the cultivation of the traditional city, its architecture and art through writing, planning or promotion."

During the late 50s and early 60s, John served on the Ithaca City Planning Board. In the early 1960s, he ran unsuccessfully for city alderman as a Democrat in a mostly Republican ward. During his campaign, he attempted to ring all the doorbells in the 5th Ward, giving out yardsticks printed with the slogan "Measure Them Up, Vote For Reps."

For thirty years (1964-94), he was the founder, owner, and publisher of Historic Urban Plans. The company issued facsimiles of more than 500 town plans, city views, and maps originally published from 1493 to 1894. Many of the reproductions were made from originals in the collection he had started during his first stay abroad in 1947.

Sailing was another one of John's passions, starting with a home-built sailing kayak (constructed when he was a teenager), a Snipe, several years competing in the Ithaca Star fleet, a Rhodes 19, and finally the Catalina 27 "Reprise," which served for twenty-three summers as an evening get-away for John and Connie, and as a place where the two could entertain guests.

With three other Ithaca couples, John and Connie also enjoyed six carefully planned wine-tasting expeditions to France, Germany, Italy, California, Spain, and Portugal. They also took part in several two-week Elderhostel programs in England, France, and Greece, as well as many others in the United States.

In his final years, John’s hobbies were reading French mysteries and novels (in French), and photographing the ospreys that nest on the east side of Stewart Park. He was a regular at the Hangar Theatre, the Kitchen Theatre, and the Friends of the Tompkins Country Public Library Book Sale.

There will be no funeral. A gathering for family, friends, and colleagues to remember John's life will be held later. In lieu of flowers, any donations in his memory should be directed to the Hangar Theatre, Ithaca, NY
14850; the Kitchen Theatre Company, Ithaca, NY 14850; or to the John Reps Dissertation Prize, Society for American City and Regional Planning History (sacrph.org).