

Lawrence Livingston Jr. – city planner, environmentalist

By John King

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Lawrence Livingston Jr., a planner who left his mark on everything from San Francisco's Market Street to the Bay Area's natural landscape, has died at his home in Tiburon.

He was 89 when he died on Dec. 5, his family said.

Mr. Livingston guided a 1971 study that made the then-radical case it would be better financially for the city of Palo Alto to turn nearby hillsides into parks than to let them be developed. That argument galvanized environmentalists throughout Northern California and eventually brought him a National Distinguished Leadership Award from the American Planning Association.

But in the 20 years before that, Mr. Livingston worked on such ambitious big-city efforts as BART and Yerba Buena Center — and when he looked back at his career in a 1980 essay, he questioned whether he and his profession had done more harm than good.

"I find myself disillusioned by the consequences of city planning

in general and with my individual contributions in particular," Mr. Livingston wrote in "Confessions of a City Planner."

"The best that can be said," he added, "... is that the benefits probably have outweighed the financial and non-financial costs by a slight margin."

Though Mr. Livingston was a tough self-critic, people he worked with say he served the Bay Area well: combining creativity and intellectual discipline with a genuine respect for the region where he was born and raised.

"He always wanted to bring out the sense of what the Bay Area is, the essence," said architect Lawrence Halprin, a longtime friend. "He didn't want to turn it into something else or turn it over to developers."

Mr. Livingston was born in 1918. A fourth-generation San Franciscan, he graduated from Stanford University with a degree in history before serving in the Army Air Forces during World War II; after his discharge he earned a law degree from Yale and a master's in city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He returned to the Bay Area in 1949 with what he described in "Confessions of a City Planner" as "as intoxicating blend of professional ambition and reformer's zeal." After a brief stint as an assistant planning director with the city of Oakland, he went into private practice, eventually forming a partnership with John Blayney that became one of the region's most influential planning firms.

When the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association issued the report "What to Do About Market Street," calling for widened sidewalks and a string of plazas, Mr. Livingston was in the middle of it — a vision that formed the basis for today's brick promenade. He was involved with the planning efforts that led to BART as early as 1953, as well as the original 1964 plans for today's Yerba Buena district south of Market Street.

That plan, unveiled by the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency, bore little resemblance to the arts-infused district that exists today. It included a sports arena and an airline terminal, with no provision for housing the elderly people

who lived in the district's aging hotels.

"The planners should not have been surprised, but we were, when residents of the area organized to militantly oppose the project," Mr. Livingston recalled in "Confessions of a City Planner." Writing in 1980 — when blocks of land still sat vacant, with the residents gone and initial plans scrapped, he concluded "The concept of Yerba Buena Center was not a mistake, but the way the plan was carried out was a tragedy."

From 1970 on, Mr. Livingston's focus shifted.

For all his interest in urban redevelopment, Mr. Livingston also was active with figures such as Jack Kent and Dorothy Erskine in debating how to keep the region's terrain from being blurred by low-density sprawl. Through the group People for Open Space they released a study touting the benefits of empty land to a region's image.

Then, in 1971, Mr. Livingston and Blayney applied this idea to the city of Palo Alto, where officials were deciding how much growth should be allowed in nearby foothills. The firm laid out convention-



Lawrence Livingston Jr. changed how people and municipalities look at the natural landscape.

development schemes before concluding that if the city bought the land, leaving it fallow would be a better deal in the long run than the costs of adding new neighborhoods.

The study led the City Council to downzone the land, which sparked lawsuits but also influenced how other cities and counties looked at the landscape.

"The Palo Alto study opened a whole new way of thinking about open space, giving it an economic rationale. It had only been seen as a recreational amenity until then" said Larry Orman. Now the executive director of GreenInfo Network, Orman was an early employee of the Greenbelt Alliance, an advocacy group that evolved from People for Open Space.

Orman remembers Mr. Living-

ston as the best kind of advocate: principled and pragmatic.

"Larry believed in doing good, but he also wanted it done well," Orman said. "He had a lawyer's incisiveness and a planner's dreaminess. It was an odd combination, but it really worked."

In later years, Mr. Livingston worked as a consultant. In 1987, he received the distinguished leader award from the American Planning Association — which dubbed him "Mr. Open Space."

Even in his final years, "he had an enormous intellectual curiosity about almost everything," said Henrik Bull, an architect who would lunch with him often at Rooney's in Tiburon. "He was never just a planner."

Mr. Livingston is survived by his sons, Mathew Livingston of Petaluma and Jonathan Livingston of Mill Valley; his daughter, Eve Livingston Reeves of Santa Paula (Ventura County), and two grandchildren.

The family asks that memorial contributions go to the Greenbelt Alliance, 631 Howard St., San Francisco, Ca. 94105. Memorial services are pending.