

Laurel Cornell  
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Laurel Cornell's career reflects her diverse interests and range of expertise. She is best known as a historical demographer but that does little to capture the true breath of her contributions. Since coming to IU in 1987 she has served in four departments at IU: Studio Art, Gender Studies, East Asian Languages and Cultures, and Sociology. Prior to coming to IU she held a position in Anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh and one in Sociology at Cornell University. Laurel's work spans the study of demographic patterns in early modern Japan (1600-1868) to the history of roads in the United States. Her methodological contributions are equally broad as she developed techniques for deriving demographic data from Japan's population registers and innovative methods for using visual images to convey information.

Laurel's professional life was formed by two experiences: growing up as a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) and attending Friends World College (FWC). The Friends' central tenet that "there is that of God in every person" led her to do research on the vernacular, whether it be the lives of ordinary people in 18th and 19th century Japan or the landscape of the road system. While at FWC, Laurel lived for a year each in Mexico, Kenya, South India, and Japan and wrote a senior thesis that was reviewed by an eminent Japanese social anthropologist, Chie Nakane. Laurel received her Ph.D. from the Department of Social Relations at the Johns Hopkins University.

Laurel's research on the historical demography of early modern Japan used historical population registers to examine how biological constraints and social values about family arrangements influence decisions about family formation, fragmentation and headship. In the early 1990s this line of research came to an end, both because historical demographers had answered the questions they began with in the 1970s and because the character of the local population data from 18th and 19th century meant that other questions could not be addressed. No accurate birth dates meant no studies of infant mortality and few surviving records of economic activity at the local level precluded addressing a number of fascinating topics.

Laurel took a big risk and returned to graduate school to study landscape architecture, combining her interest in gardening with her professional interest in visual representation. She received a graduate degree in landscape architecture from the University of Virginia in 2003, twenty years after her first graduate degree. This experience helped her identify new research questions and she acquired a new set of skills.

Combining landscape architecture and sociology proved to be more challenging than Laurel expected, especially considering her earlier success in combining demography, history, and Japanese studies. This was not because the two disciplines are incompatible. Instead Laurel came to realize the enormous depth of the knowledge she had had in Japanese studies, the breadth of personal contacts she had from being

immersed in it for twenty years, and how this innate knowledge contributes to professional success.

However, Laurel found ways to build on her new training in innovative ways. She has developed a series of “analytical landscapes,” large-scale visual representations combining aesthetic approaches with statistical analysis to help people understand landscapes in new ways. Laurel has exhibited this work in several venues, posing a question about a specific landscape and engaging the viewer with graphic visual representations of information, data, or knowledge combined with photographs and drawings. Another set of papers presented at national and international conferences examine the historical development of the road system in the United States and traces the consequences of that system for public health and mobility. In 2007 she was awarded the Cornelis Lely Prize from the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic, and Mobility.

Laurel’s early experiences at FWC also shaped her teaching in fundamental ways. It led her to the belief that any interested person can learn any topic, and that it is the responsibility of the faculty member to set up a learning situation where students are engaged in the topic and can succeed in their learning. To that end, Laurel has focused most of her teaching on introductory level courses. At FWC she also developed a deep appreciation for what is now termed “project-based learning” and her classes routinely incorporate a hands-on approach to teaching and learning. In recent years she has applied her diverse interests to scholarship on teaching and learning, developing and assessing new visual methods for undergraduate learning.

Laurel is also committed to working to make the world a better place and working for social change, whether through teaching, research or direct action. This commitment to service is evident not only from Laurel’s generous service to her many departments and the College of Arts and Sciences, but also to her extensive contributions to the Bloomington community. Laurel has served as President of Friends of Art, of Bloomington Restorations Inc. and of the City of Bloomington Tree Commission; as Vice President of the Citizen’s Advisory Council of the Bloomington/Monroe County Metropolitan Planning Organization and of the Indiana Limestone Symposium, and as board member of Episcopal Campus Ministry IU and the John Waldron Arts Center.

As Laurel charts the next phase of her life three things are clear: she will be engaged, she will bring a diverse set of interests and skills to whatever she undertakes, and her contributions will be innovative and important.

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