

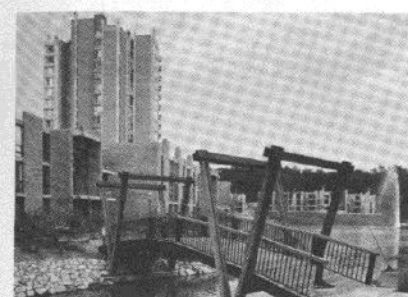
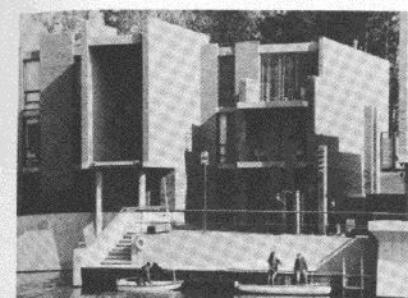
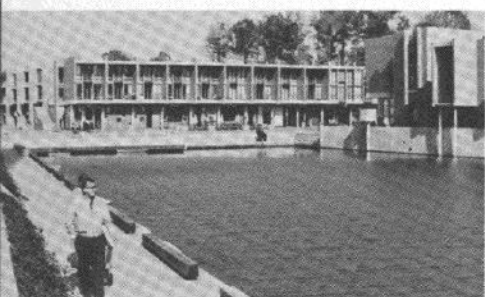
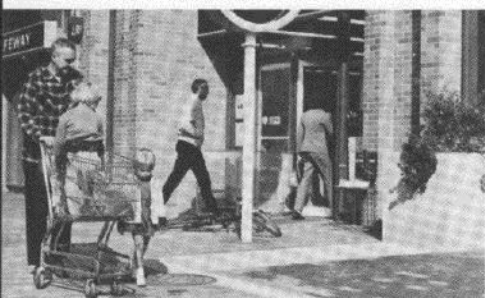
Planning for "Public Concerns"

by Wolf Von Eckardt

A brave New Town in Northern Virginia continues

the traditions of city planning brought to these shores by enlightened colonists.





Reston, a lovely, budding New Town nestled in the rolling hills of northern Fairfax County, is the first new community in Virginia since Williamsburg to be built in the spirit of the instructions given the earliest colonists as they set sail for these shores in 1606. The settlers were, in effect, told by the London Company to plan and build viable towns rather than scattered encampments. As to the layout of the towns, the instructions were brief but

admirably clear: "And seeing that order is the same price with confusion," they began, "it shall be advisedly done to set your houses even and by a line, that your streets may have a good breadth and be carried square about your market place."

When Virginia became a Commonwealth in a Union dedicated to liberty, Williamsburg lost importance and deteriorated, and so did the advisedly planned order of our settlements on this continent. Confusion and scattered encampments of all kinds took over and kept sprawling to the point where, now, accelerated by explosive population growth

and mechanization, the whole countryside is threatened by ugly urbanization. Liberty has been understood to include the freedom to exploit the land for private gain and to pollute our water and air as well. "Planning" is a dirty word.

It therefore surprises us to read that John Page, a wealthy and prominent Virginia landholder, was ordered by Gover-

nor Francis Nicholson in 1704 to pull down his home ("four old Houses and Oven") so that Williamsburg might have an uncluttered vista down Gloucester Street. John Page and his peers, however, were not the least bit surprised.

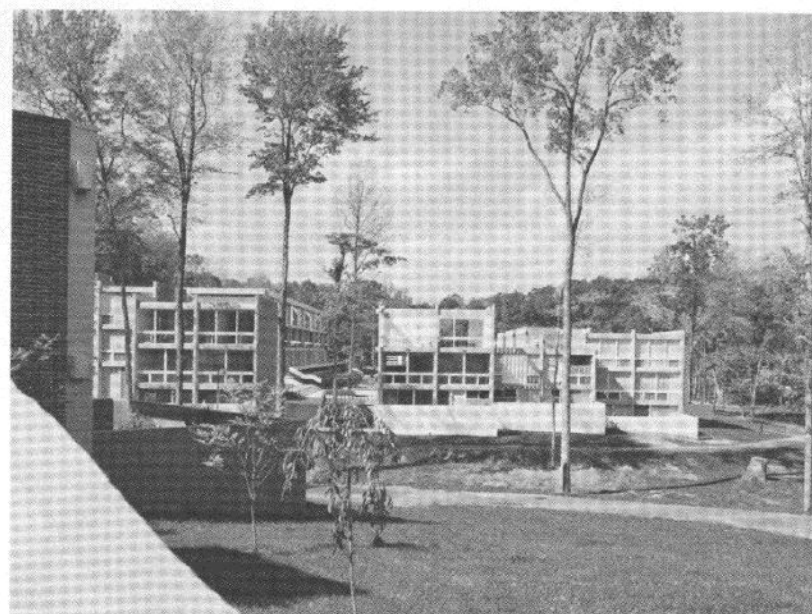
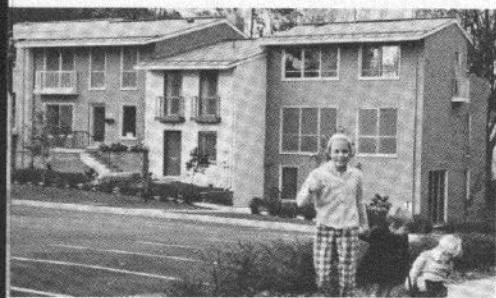
In the early days of our country it was understood that only sound planning and comprehensive urban design could create "a healthy, proper and commodious place," as it was put. And it was found

that a good place to live must include parks, open spaces, community buildings, markets, schools and amenities "for Publick Concerns."

In the end, it is "Publick Concerns" in the original American tradition that built Reston, though, in this century, the fresh impetus for building New Towns came again from England, and Reston is, of course, the private enterprise of an idealistic real-estate developer, Robert E. Simon (his initials form the first three letters of his town's name).

The already completed part of Reston, found as you turn off from Route 606, is called "Lake Anne Village." It is only one of seven such neighborhoods to come. When all seven villages, a bustling town center and the industrial district are completed (in about fifteen years, according





to plan). Reston is to have 75,000 inhabitants. The thoughtful masterplan was drawn up by architects Whittlesey, Conklin and Rossant. As the first village shows, it promises a town that will be a far cry from both our messy cities and our humdrum Suburbia, including all the more recent subdivisions choosing, now that

the term has become fashionable, to call themselves "New Towns."

Lake Anne Village embraces the northern tip of a man-made lake. What you first see of it from the distance is an apartment house tower. Like the church steeples and cathedrals in the old towns, it marks the place in the landscape and gives it identity. And like the old towns, Lake Anne has a heart, a pulsating market place. You come upon it, once you

have parked the car and walked a few steps, as a dramatic surprise, much as you suddenly come upon the Piazza San Marco in Venice. Like San Marco, it is not a mere square, but a grand hall with the open sky its ceiling and the lake pro-



viding an ever-changing dimension and well-framed kinetic mural.

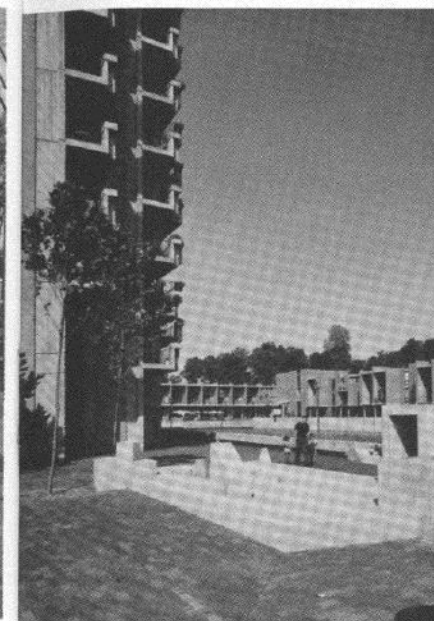
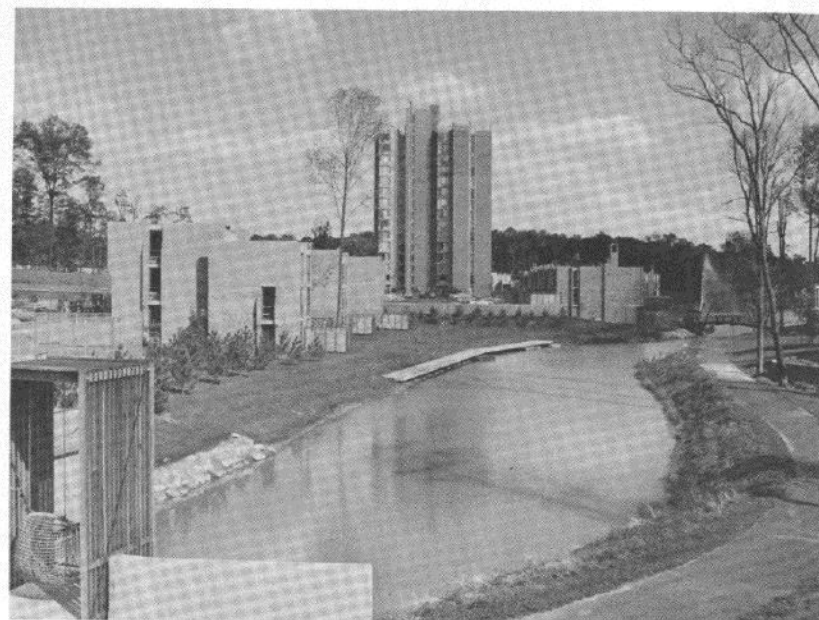
Nor is this an ordinary shopping center. It is an *agora*, with its sculptured fountain, its handsome, modern storefronts and tasteful signs that give all public life a festive focus. Don't be surprised to find some Socrates there, edifying citizenry. It is the setting for dance festivals, concerts and other celebrations. And it is the

place where strangers become friends in the course of their casual encounters on the way to the stores, the community center, the restaurant and outdoor cafe, the teenagers' "rathskeller," the nursery school, the art gallery and, soon, a church.

What's more, there is always life on this square, even when the shops are closed, for the simple reason that people live

right on it. It is widely considered un-American to live above a store, and the bankers insisted it couldn't be done. They were wrong: all these handsome apartments around the plaza are rented. For the fun of living in them, however, the occupants forego another pleasure





enjoyed by Restonians in the townhouses along the lakeshore: shopping by boat.

The lake is beautiful, and the townhouses enhance it. To the left, as you take in the view from the village square with its moorings, are Bill Conklin's creations, artful but not arty, highly sculptural, restrained but not abstract expressionism, with a touch of nostalgia for the medieval. "You don't show all you know in one project," remarked Louis Kahn

when he saw them. "How does he know that's all we know?" replied Conklin when I told him. And indeed you sense that his imagination has barely got started, though wherever it takes him, he can always look back on Lake Anne with pride.

To the right is sheer Portofino, cleaned up but not sanitized—the picturesque townhouses by Chloethiel Woodard Smith. She has a knack for making you feel comfortable with her architecture. For her, a house is a house is a house, and it doesn't have to show off its modernity, though it is cheerfully of our time.

Charles M. Goodman's splendidly arranged cluster of houses, in the woods

above the lake, are more self-conscious in style. While Mrs. Smith (and Conklin, too, for that matter) is concerned about people in the 20th century, Goodman still feels constrained to impress the 20th century on people.

Yes, there is a great deal of variety in the architecture of Reston. You'll see more of our versatile modern architecture in the more recent parts of the town—Chloethiel Smith's more severe Portofino in the woods, an absolutely marvelous cluster by Louis Sauer (a new talent

to watch!) around the golf course, which manages to make each rowhouse look like a custom-tailored creation, and others. Variety, in fact, begins to run wild, when it comes to the acres of mostly non-architecture, Reston's detached builders' "homes" (so-called, presumably, because most developers are incapable of designing a decent house). Here,

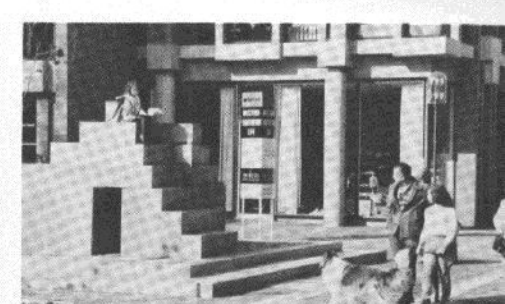
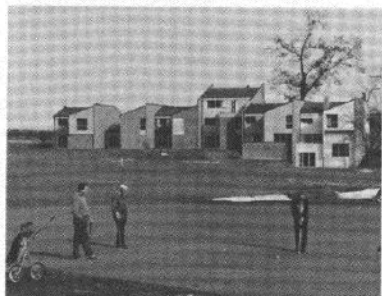
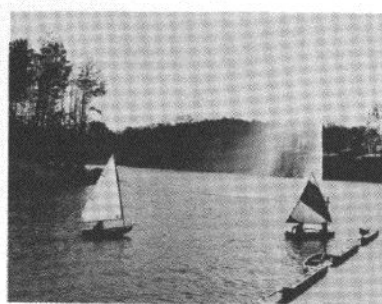
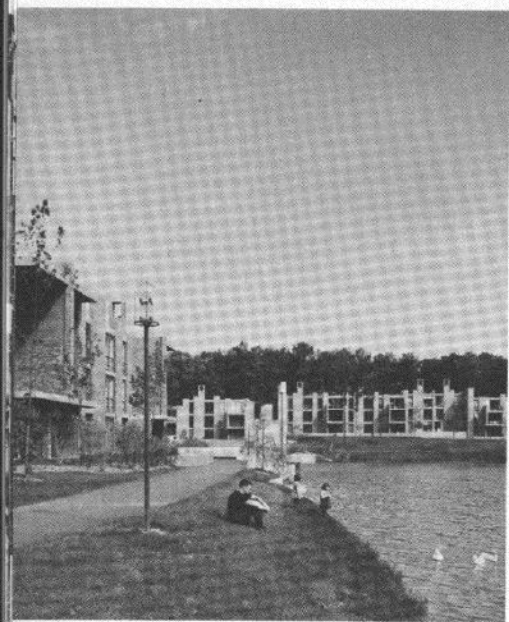
somehow, Reston's architectural controls broke down under the strains of getting this ambitious enterprise started.

The insistence on variety, even when it is as unusually good as in Reston, is, however, a recent phenomenon, introduced by the eclectic Victorians. It

makes Reston different from Williamsburg, which was built at a time when people still believed in harmony and felt capable of expressing their individuality within a predominant style. They saw no need to invent a new architecture (or painting or sculptural fashion) every Monday morning. We must be very insecure about our individuality to be wanting to express it all the time. And we seem to fear boredom more than ugliness.

But Reston's more fundamental difference from Williamsburg is its basic plan.





Williamsburg, with its reminiscence of Sir Christopher Wren (urban planning historian John W. Reps thinks it possible that Governor Nicholson actually consulted Wren about William and Mary), with its emphasis on vistas and symmetry,

is, of course, Renaissance in layout. It is an expression of man's power to set himself up against nature and straighten her out, as it were.

Today, as we fly faster than sound, build hundred-story-high monstrosities, and need only push a button to blow up the earth, we'd just as soon keep our place to live in a human scale and make nature our friend. The planners of Reston, at least, belong to the school that would rather see a boy fishing from the jetty of the village square (and Reston's

boys do), than cover the place with an air-conditioned bubble dome. They'd rather have a cardinal perch on your window sill than let you park your car in front of it. If this is romantic, as some technocratic city planners believe, make the most of it! If this is unrealistic, Reston's boys and cardinals are real. And if Reston's plan in contrast to Renaissance magnificence

seems a return to medieval humility, it is also a return to humanism.

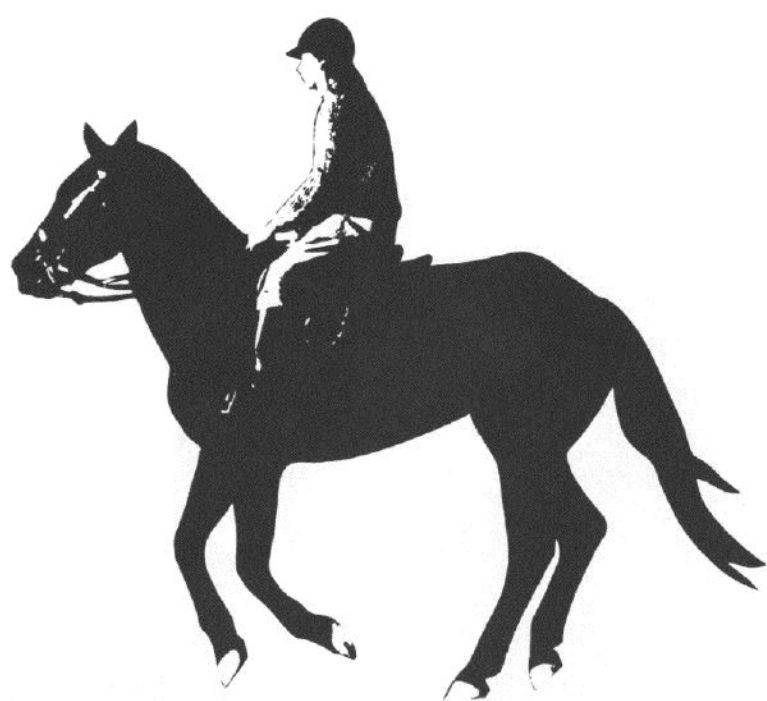
In Reston, man is again the ruler of his environment. You can walk again, and the walkways are separated from the driveways. You can walk just to walk, or to shop, or to play, or to attend the Virginia Museum Chapter's cultural events, or—yes—to go to work.

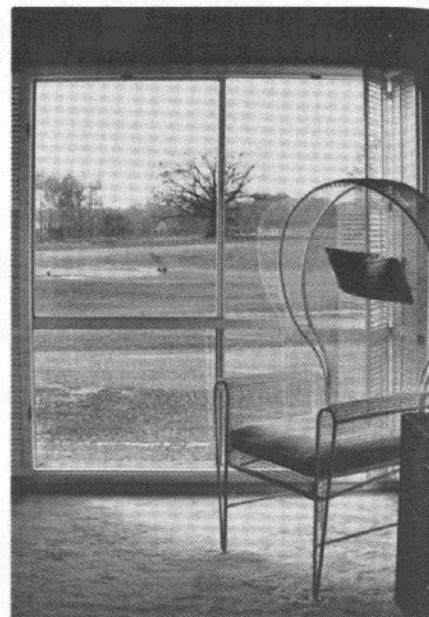
For that is the essence of the New Town idea—to create places where man does not dissipate himself rushing hectically to and fro, where he can do his

work, sleep, worship and enjoy himself. Reston has a 970-acre industrial park already populated by six "think-tank" factories. As a coming-out present, at the dedication of Lake Anne Village last spring, Interior Secretary Stewart L.

Udall promised to locate the headquarters of the U.S. Geological Survey there. That's 3,000 employees and potential residents, who won't have to commute.

What this does was best illustrated to me by one of Reston's kindergarten teachers. The paintings of her tots, she suddenly discovered, were different from those she was used to seeing in Suburbia. When a family was depicted, it had a Daddy in it! At Reston children see their fathers again, and he sees them





on more occasions than through a martini glass on the way to bed.

As mentioned above, the idea of building complete, instant towns started in England, where 18 of them have been built since the New Towns Act of 1946. These towns are somewhat different from those Ebenezer Howard visualized when he

launched the movement with his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, a little book published in 1902 that may still save us from Megalopolis. But the British have stuck to Howard's basic premise: rather than let cities sprawl out indefinitely, we ought to be at least as smart as bees and start a new hive elsewhere. The hive, he said, should be of limited size (Howard thought a population of 30,000 would be just

right), and should be surrounded by a permanent greenbelt to preserve some nearby open country for everyone to enjoy. Without ever mentioning the word, Howard, of course, knew far more about urban ecology than most of today's city

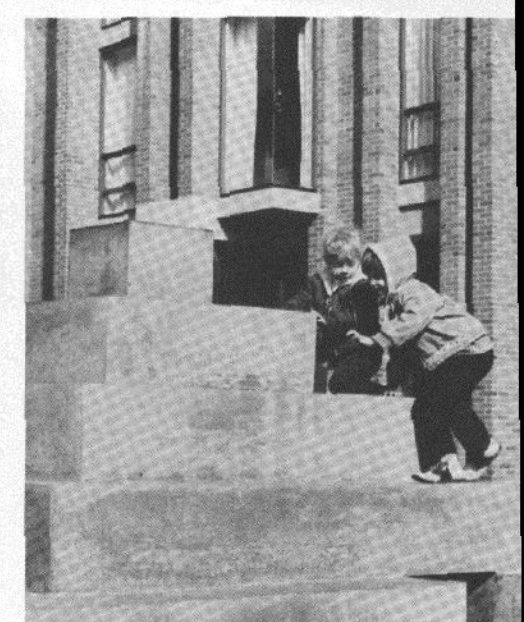
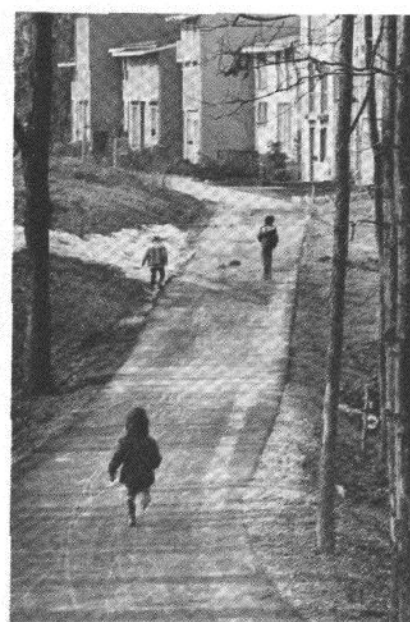
planners who glibly use such high-sounding terms. And although his notion that we ought to empty out the big city slums, turn them into pleasant parks, and rehouse their inhabitants decently where they can find work and fresh air, seemed utterly utopian even five years ago, it

now seems one of the best answers yet advanced to Watts and similar ghettos.

New Towns are suddenly springing up all over the world, even in the Soviet Union, and although until Reston came along, we in this country seemed to be lagging behind, we contributed decisively to the art of planning them. Every modern community that aspires to be livable owes a debt to Clarence Stein and his

colleagues, who, supported by Lewis Mumford, were the first to cope constructively with the motor age. Stein's great creation, Radburn, New Jersey, never became the real New Town it was meant to be because the Depression





interfered. But it showed us how to separate people from automobiles and the great values of cluster development.

Robert Simon's father, also a real-estate investor and developer, was involved in the construction of Radburn in 1928. Simon, now 51, remembers sitting around the dining room table, picking Radburn street names. The experience

made a deep impression on him. He mentions it often.

He is a taut, yet amiable man, witty, Harvard, an enthusiastic sportsman, for 24 years President of Carnegie Hall, a very practical idealist, and obviously very courageous. There are other New Towns on the way in this country now—Columbia in Maryland, others in California, Arizona and Hawaii. But Simon ventured it first (now supported by Gulf Oil and John Hancock Life Insurance) and with-

out Government help; he ventured it for all the rest, including the Government whenever it gets around to building New Towns for rich and poor together. He gambles not only with a new idea but also with a determination that seems to have disappeared from private enter-

prise—the determination to attain excellence. He is setting a standard that future New Towns will have to live up to.

The critics of the New Town idea—and there are many—either still oppose planning altogether or maintain we should plan technological chaos and keep scattering our special encampments farther and farther apart along more and more freeways, for in the end, they say, we shall always be able to communicate electronically. They would abandon the community and suburbanize the world.

There are also those for whom a Reston seems too sterile and aseptic. They haven't looked closely, if they have seen it at all. A good many young lovers have already carved each other's initials into the railing of the Lake Anne footbridge. This may be vandalism. But it is surely also most encouraging reassurance that

irrepressible human vitality can always be counted on to mess things up just enough to make them human.

We cannot start with the mess, however, and that is what our present habitats are. "Seeing that order is the same price with confusion," therefore, it appears high time that, as once at Williamsburg and now at Reston, we build our places to live with "Public Concerns."

