

New Towns for Old Cities

by ELLEN HOFFMAN

THE PROSPECT of starting something completely new has great appeal when problems seem insoluble.

The United States has now gone through almost a decade of governmental tinkering with the breakdowns of old cities—poverty, crime, racism, pollution—only to see the same problems intensify to ever more uncontrollable proportions. In some quarters there is a growing conviction that the best—possibly the only—way to achieve the goal of a city without these breakdowns is to build a new one.

And so in recent years there has been a renaissance of the "New Town" movement in this country. Since the English town planner Ebenezer Howard proposed in 1898 that "garden cities" be built to siphon off population from congested industrial cities, European countries and, to a much lesser extent, the United States have experimented with the "New Town" concept.

In rural Howard County, Maryland, between two of the country's worst urban examples, stands Columbia, a new town whose creators refer to it as "The Next America." From Columbia it is less than an hour's drive to the choking smog of Baltimore industry in one direction, and to the poverty of Washington's black slums in the other.

Situated in the Baltimore-Washington "corridor," Columbia straddles the path demographers have plotted for the growth of the eastern megalopolis that begins in Boston and sprawls southward through New York City, New Jersey, and Philadelphia to Washington.

With a population of more than 9,000, Columbia has acquired in the

last three years many of the trappings of a city. There are shopping centers, an embryonic downtown, industrial installations, schools, and other public facilities. The developers, the Rouse Company, say that enough residential land has been sold to accommodate a population of 26,000 persons, about one-fourth of the population projection for 1980.

Columbia represents the attempt of an idealistic Baltimore businessman to shed light on two interrelated problems: how to rebuild old, decaying cities and how to build new cities that age gracefully rather than disintegrate into human and environmental chaos.

James W. Rouse was a mortgage banker who took an active part in studying urban conditions as a member of various governmental groups during the 1950s. His experience in building housing developments and shopping centers preceded his decision to take on the building of a whole city.

In the minds of many Columbia residents, Rouse himself, the city of Columbia, and the Rouse Company all blur into one large and somewhat mysterious entity. Rouse stayed underground in the days when his company was buying up Howard County land, but since the announcement of the plans for Columbia he has become the new city's most public advocate.

He appears frequently at public meetings, a practice which can result in debates with angry Columbia or

Howard County residents. A religious man and an outspoken opponent of the Vietnam war, Rouse usually captures the respect of his detractors with the personal charm he displays in face-to-face contact.

Rouse bought up nearly 14,000 acres of Howard County in the early 1960s; he knew that the population there would boom regardless of who owned the land. His aim was to create a model city, to head off the urban sprawl that was already spreading into the corridor from the Baltimore and Washington suburbs.

Making the new city "work," Rouse believed, would require planning physical facilities only after the needs of future residents had been determined. He stressed the importance of anticipating how physical structures would affect the lives of human beings.

Rouse called together thirteen experts from different fields—sociology, education, transportation, and others—and with some members of his own staff set up a unique planning group which after six months of discussion came up with a set of principles they believed should be embodied in the new town. In the words of chief planner Morton Hoppenfeld who came to Columbia after working for Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. planning agencies, the principles were:

¶ "Creation of a social and physical environment which would work for people, nourishing human growth (in contrast to the threatening or stifling environment of many old cities and new suburbs).

¶ Development "as a venture of private capital, to make a profit in the land development and sale."

¶ Provision of "optimum choices" in the way of life of the residents (in contrast to a community that attracts only one type of resident, for example, middle-class white Protestants).

¶ Creation of a "truly balanced community: a job for every residence, a dwelling for every job opportunity."

Once these principles were laid out, the practical aspects of construction

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had to be considered. Rouse had already obtained a \$23.5 million loan from Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, which he used to purchase the initial parcel of land. He later borrowed another \$25 million from other sources, including the Chase Manhattan Bank and the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America.

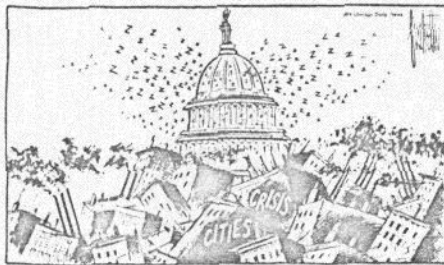
With the deeds and money in hand, Rouse went to the government of Howard County in 1964 and announced that he planned to build a city there. County residents had realized for some time that somebody was buying up farmland, but the scope of Rouse's proposed enterprise inevitably came as a shock. He managed, however, to sell county officials on the economic benefits that would accrue to the county from planning the development of his land. The effects of haphazard purchasing and land development were evident enough in nearby Prince Georges and Baltimore counties to make Rouse's proposals convincing.

Simply stated, Rouse's argument was that the industry Columbia would attract would contribute more than enough to the county's tax base to offset the cost of services required by an increase in population. The development was facilitated by approval of a special zoning law allowing for dense residential development and light industry.

Throughout the planning and early construction period, Rouse Company planners and architects kept in close touch with county officials. Shortly after plans for Columbia were announced the county's local newspaper ran a regular column featuring residents' letters to Rouse and his answers to their questions about the effects the new town would have on the county.

Of the total acreage, one-fourth was reserved for industrial development, one-fourth for open space, and half for residential purposes.

The plan calls for seven villages, each made up of a series of distinct neighborhoods. On the neighborhood level, residents are to be within walking distance of a center with an elementary school, playground, swimming pool, and a small grocery store. Each village is to have a larger commercial complex including a shopping center, community facilities such as meeting



Fischetti in Chicago Daily News

Beehive of Inactivity

rooms and teen centers, and possibly theaters and restaurants.

"Downtown" Columbia will consist of a shopping mall (now under construction) and a complex of office buildings. A development referred to by the developers as "Tivoli" (after the amusement park in Copenhagen) is planned to offer varied entertainment—theater, night clubs, restaurants, possibly an amusement park—across a man-made lake from a hotel complex.

The first of Columbia's residents moved to the new town in 1967. Two village centers are open. Each contains a supermarket, a dry cleaner, a drug store, a restaurant, and specialty shops. Residents live in a variety of housing—a high-rise apartment building, garden apartments, low-rise apartments, townhouses, or single family homes. (A townhouse is a two- or three-story attached home, usually with a yard in front and/or in the rear of each.)

The only transportation provided so far by the developers of Columbia is a minibus, financed as an experiment by the U.S. Department of Transportation. The minibus route goes through the residential neighborhoods and commercial areas, but does not stop at pre-designated locations. Residents simply flag the bus down as it plies its route.

The minibus has been running empty most of the time. "There just aren't enough places to go in Columbia," one resident says. The Rouse Company plans a study to determine why people are not using the minibus. The bus is kept running because the developers hope to condition residents to the idea that public transportation is convenient and dependable, in anticipation of the time when a more sophisticated system will operate.

Commercial bus schedules have been adjusted to carry Columbia residents to Washington and Baltimore jobs. There is no commuter train, and many residents drive to work.

Industrial development has progressed faster than the developers dared to hope. Some thirty-two industrial firms have bought land. The biggest coup was selling an industrial plot to General Electric, which is building an appliance manufacturing complex that will employ as many as 12,000 persons. The industry now in operation consists mainly of research and development firms, warehousing operations, and light manufacturing. Among the industrial tenants are Bendix Field Engineering, which tracks satellites and performs other scientific work for the space program, and Head Ski and Sportswear, a manufacturer of ski parkas and other sports clothes.

Other completed portions of Columbia's physical development are: Two shopping centers; five elementary schools and one junior high school; a fire house; a temporary medical clinic, to be used until permanent hospital and clinic facilities are built; two office buildings and a permanent exhibit building downtown; two man-made lakes (stocked with fish); a golf course; an outdoor amphitheater (used for concerts, ballet, and other summer performances); an indoor dinner theater.

Rouse believes that what has gone wrong in many cities is neglect of the relationship between people and their physical surroundings. Thus, he had in mind a way of life as well as a collection of buildings and streets when he set out to create Columbia.

Economic and racial integration were prominent among the goals of the new city. Statistics are sparse and they change constantly, so it is difficult to measure to what extent these goals have been achieved. Insisting that they do not want to get involved in a numbers game, Rouse Company officials will not estimate how many blacks live in Columbia. But they do not challenge the Howard County Human Relations Commission estimate of about fifteen per cent black residents.

Blacks who live in Columbia tend to be well-educated professionals, like their white neighbors. Many work for

the Federal Government. Some whites and blacks have expressed concern that the Rouse Company and local businessmen have not tried to hire blacks at Columbia.

The first wave of residential construction at Columbia aimed at the middle-class market. A three-story townhouse sold for \$15,000, but the price is about to go up. There are no single family homes that sell for less than \$20,000, and most are in the \$30,000 bracket.

In recent months Columbia has begun to make good on its promises to encourage economic integration. Three hundred units of government-subsidized low-income apartments and townhouses are now under construction. Annual income limitations for residents of this housing are \$5,500 for one person and up to \$10,000 for a family of seven. The rents range from \$99 per month for a one-bedroom apartment to \$151.50 for a four-bedroom unit (including utilities). About eighty of the units are occupied, and 235 families have been accepted for residence on the basis of income and family size criteria. Of the current residents in the low-income units, an estimated twenty per cent are black.

The planners have taken an unusual risk—in terms of marketing—by dispersing the low-income housing in blocs of fifty units adjacent to housing where more affluent Columbians do or will live. It is hard for a visitor to distinguish the difference in the buildings from the outside. If the plans work out as they are written, the low-income housing should attract blue-collar workers who could alleviate the labor shortage in Columbia industries.

The Rouse Company has sold land for an additional 168 apartments and townhouses for low-income residents, and construction will begin this fall. These units, like the first 300 for low-income residents, are being built under the sponsorship of a non-profit corporation set up by the religious groups in Columbia.

Plans for "The Next America" call for a relaxing, attractive physical setting that suggests the best of both city and country. A visitor notices the absence of power and telephone lines lining the roads and streets. They are underground. Industries must sign an

agreement saying that they will not pollute the air, water, or landscape. Homeowners must get permission to make more than the most limited improvements on their property or the exterior of their homes. The theory behind this is that future residents will value the assurance that their surroundings will not be allowed to deteriorate or change drastically.

Trees have been left standing on some lots; there are some green open spaces and two lakes. But critics will point out that trees in many cases have been cut down unnecessarily, and the lakes are downright muddy from being used as dumping grounds by builders.

Perhaps the strongest criticism has been leveled against the residential architecture at Columbia. Not long before Columbia started building homes, nearby Reston constructed some unusual—striking, many observers thought—modern townhouses and apartments and nevertheless had trouble finding people who wanted to live in them. Half of the single family homes in Columbia so far have been built by one company, chosen by Rouse. The typical home buyer would be hard put to differentiate between these and the models he sees in any suburban development. Pricked by the criticism from architectural circles, the Rouse Company encouraged its builders to look around the country for new ideas.

Most builders chose to visit California and came back with drawings for models with high roofs and ceilings and glass walls that provide close-up views of nature. These houses have

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been selling well, and they represent what will be constructed in Columbia in the near future.

The Rouse Company itself has built some apartments—no single family homes—and the public facilities. The two village centers display vastly different architectural styles. The first is a two-story, arc-shaped construction with shops on the lower level and offices above. A rustic wooden stairway

leads up from the center square (known as "the green") to a balcony providing access to the offices above. A fountain in the square and sculpture of a family vaguely reminiscent of a work by Henry Moore stand nearby.

The second village center, Oakland Mills, was built around some old barns and silos left standing on the site of a former farm. The buildings were connected and an indoor mall built. The barns and silos have been remodeled into community facilities—meeting rooms, a dance hall, and a teen center.

Whether they judge the architecture of the town centers to be "good" or "bad," visitors to Columbia tend to believe it is more imaginative and attractive than the architecture of most of the homes.

"We felt our responsibility was different [in the public facilities]," explains Rouse. "We felt we had to design to what we considered acceptable standards." The hope is that the public architecture will "have an impact on taste and on home builders," he says, that will result in better residential designs.

Educational and recreational activities—particularly for children—have received much attention in planning the new city. There are many play areas, swimming pools, tennis courts and the like that are accessible to the residents. The schools in Columbia are modern, open-space buildings equipped with the latest in teaching aids and staffed by teaching teams.

Antioch College operates a branch out of an old farmhouse, using Columbia as a laboratory for studying new town development. A public community college will open this fall. A third college, named after the late U.N. Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, will be a unique institution if it can raise the money to open. Its emphasis would be on area studies, with American students living in a house—for example, "India House"—conducted in the style of another culture along with students and faculty members from that country. Baltimore's Peabody Conservatory of Music has a branch that offers classes and individual instruction to Columbia residents.

Facilities for public performances are limited. The outdoor amphitheater can be used only in the summer. There is a dinner theater, but Columbia has

no movie theater yet and the only stage performances are produced by amateurs.

Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders have formed an ecumenical, nonprofit corporation which sponsored the first low-income housing and is building a single religious facility to be used by all faiths. Most religious groups will conduct their own services, although on some occasions they plan to cooperate on ecumenical observances.

Residents seem happy with the schools, parks, and church facilities. The institution they have the most doubts about is government.

Government of the new town poses the problem of who should make decisions for future residents. Columbia is located within a county and is subject to its government. Because of restrictions under Maryland law, it is unlikely that Columbia will incorporate, at least in the foreseeable future. Residents have, to some extent, picked up the thread of cooperation with the county government started by Rouse. But at the same time residents have learned that their interest is not always the same as that of the developer.

The developer established a nonprofit corporation to run the recreation, transportation, and other services for residents. Called the Columbia Association (CA), the corporation is now controlled by Rouse executives. But as Columbia grows, residents will increase their representation on its governing board until they fill all of the seats. When development is complete and the Rouse Company's original investment has been returned, the residents will control the Association.

A new resident of Columbia signs a "covenant" making him a voting member of a village association and giving him the right to vote for members of its board. At the risk of losing his right to vote in the village election, a resident must pay fees levied to finance physical improvements. In addition, homeowners and tenants must agree to abide by established guidelines concerning architectural changes and improvements to homes and property.

Through the elected village boards residents express their concerns to the Columbia Association, but there has been a feeling in recent months that CA is not willing to cooperate. For example, residents fought for the right to

see the CA budget before it was given final approval. Some vocal critics have mobilized the residents—for example, when the developer allowed a builder to mow down some trees illegally. But most residents seem to feel that they moved to Columbia because they supported Rouse's plans and they are willing to endure a period of disenfranchisement to assure that the master plan is carried out.

In making an overall assessment of Columbia it seems necessary to distinguish between the city today and what it is intended to become in five or ten years. Today, Columbia offers amenities most attractive to young families with young children. The middle class, with two family cars, is at home there now. Active theater or movie-goers would find Columbia a restrictive environment. They would have to expect to make frequent automobile trips to the city to enjoy these luxuries.

The lack of "things to do" has been felt particularly by teen-agers, who often do not drive and cannot easily make contact with friends who live outside Columbia. There was a major drug raid in Columbia in August, 1969, and police found that the new town had become a center of drug trade for youngsters from all over the Washington and Baltimore metropolitan areas. Since then CA and a number of county agencies have been working with youngsters to develop new activities and to let them plan and operate their own Columbia teen centers.

While construction and sales of homes elsewhere in the country have been hard-hit by economic conditions, Columbia has increased its sales and rentals each year. In 1967, 451 units were sold or rented; in 1968, 805; and in 1969, 1722. March, 1970, was one of the biggest months, with 293 units sold or rented. Plans are moving ahead for the construction and design of the next village centers and the downtown mall.

It is important for the Rouse Company to make money, and not just for the usual reason of pleasing the stockholders. Rouse wants to demonstrate at Columbia that building a city can be profitable business. The hope is that life insurance companies and other major sources of capital would then be encouraged to invest in more "new town" developments so desperately

needed throughout the country.

The need to make money can lead to compromises, and obviously some have been made at Columbia. For example, the developer allowed Levitt & Sons to build homes that make a corner of "The Next America" look just like any Levittown. The other homes that have received architectural criticism might be seen as a reflection of the Rouse Company's unwillingness to push a builder so far that he abandons the Columbia project.

If Rouse is successful he may provide the push that the Government needs to get into the business of building cities. The New Communities Act passed during the Johnson Administration provides loan guarantees to prospective developers, but is regarded by planners as inadequate to meet the nation's growth needs. A number of bills that would expand Federal powers in planning and development of new towns have been introduced, but the Nixon Administration has not given this legislation priority attention.

Only one proposed new town—Jonathan, outside the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota—has received a go-ahead under the existing law. Many developers have applied, but Federal officials are skeptical of the applicants' abilities to put together teams of planners that can come up with cities that "work" economically and socially.

In the foreseeable future Columbia's role will be to set a highly visible example both to potential private developers and government planners. Geographically near Washington and located in the Vice President's state, Columbia will probably continue to be watched by Federal officials who are trying to develop national policies on urban growth in general and new towns in particular.

It is impossible to predict what the significance of Columbia will be when planners look back at it ten years from now. At the moment, Columbia represents one of the few earnest attempts to build new towns that do not repeat the fatal mistakes built into our major cities. In a nation whose population grows by 250,000 Americans a month, new towns represent one of several potential alternatives to the congestion of the country's spreading megalopolises.