The Making of Reston and Columbia

Reston, Va., and Columbia, Md., were founded in the 1960s with similar visions for inclusive, connected communities

BY EMILY WAVERING CORCORAN

In the mid-1960s, Doris Briggs and her four children drove the 700 miles from Chicago to Virginia in her Chevrolet in pursuit of a new life. Briggs would later recall, "Everybody said, 'Don't do it, don't do it, you have no friends.' I said I have friends *everywhere*. And I had my faith, had my four children, and I knew it was going to be a better life for me." Their destination, Reston, Va., promised a community-centered alternative to modern suburbia that was inclusive of black families like the Briggses — well before the Fair Housing Act of 1968 made housing discrimination illegal.

Beverly Cosham, another early black resident of Reston, remembers facing similar skepticism and feeling the same sense of conviction. "Everybody I knew said, 'Why are you moving to Virginia? Aren't you far enough south in D.C.?' Reston felt different. It was that bucolic, safe, wonderful place."

Reston was a "New Town," one in a series of communities founded in the 1960s and '70s across the United States to reimagine suburban living. The communities of the New Town Movement — including Reston's northern neighbor, Columbia, Md. — were founded on similar values but varied in their long-term viability.

Some, like Soul City, N.C., faced an assortment of economic and political challenges that forced them to shutter. Others, including Reston and Columbia, achieved relative success in fulfilling their founders' vision. Still, these communities have periodically made compromises to preserve their economic feasibility and continue to navigate challenging questions about affordability, inclusivity, and future development.

"Live, Work, Play"

The vision for Reston was enshrined in the town's 1962 Master Plan by founder Robert E. Simon Jr. Development would give priority to walkability and accessible amenities and would enable residents to live and work in the same area. Reston would also be open to individuals of all ages, incomes, races, and ethnicities — in fact, it was the first integrated community in Virginia. Simon created the community's motto to capture this vision: "Live, Work, Play."

Simon was a New York real estate developer whose vision for Reston grew from personal experience. As a child, Simon grew up in New York City across from a park. Later in life, he would recall how formative it was to grow up with easy access to nature, school, shopping, and public transportation.

The son of a real estate developer father and a cultural enthusiast mother, Simon was taught from a young age to value aesthetics and cultural experiences. He traveled to Europe frequently with his family, but it was during a solo post-college European bike tour that Simon was first exposed to dense neighborhoods centered on a plaza, which would later inform his vision of Reston's physical layout.

At 23, Simon inherited Carnegie Hall after his father's death and subsequently became president of the concert venue. During this time, he was also a young father who spent much of his time commuting. His dislike of that lifestyle further motivated his desire to create a self-contained community. In 1960, Simon sold his share of Carnegie Hall and an opportunity soon presented itself in the form of 6,750 acres for sale outside of Washington, D.C.

From the outset, Simon's vision for the land was different; in the words of Francis Steinbauer, a design engineer who worked on the master plan, Reston was "not just a building project but a whole new way of living." Practically, this meant dense, mixed-use development that was not permissible under the existing zoning code in Fairfax County, Va. Although the county was resistant at first, it ultimately created a new zoning code that rejected the single-use standard of the day and allowed for a mix of single-family homes, apartments, condominiums, commercial development, recreational facilities, and open spaces in proximity to one another.

Reston was developed in 1964 as an "open community," one that welcomed all races and religions into integrated housing communities.

IMAGE: PONY FREUNDLICH, COURTESY OF THE RESTON MUSEUM

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Reston was founded on April 10, 1964 — Simon's 50th birthday — with a name derived from his initials, R. E. S. Seven principles drafted by Simon himself underpinned the development and community. Among these were that residents would be able to live, work and remain in Reston "throughout their lives," that all planning would focus on "the importance and dignity of the individual," that beauty "should be fostered," and lastly, that "Reston should be a financial success."

These principles directly informed the town's design. The master plan established seven villages, each with a distinct architectural style and built for 10,000 residents. Each village was centered on a plaza that provided walkable access to stores and restaurants, created jobs, generated revenue through commercial leasing, and had designated space for educational, recreational, and cultural programming.

Surrounding each plaza was an assortment of housing types meant to cater to different life stages and income levels — from more affordable apartments and condominiums to single-family homes. Schools, churches, job centers, and parks were interspersed throughout the villages.

Reston opened to residents in 1964 with Lake Anne Village Center as its first village. On the whole, Reston enjoyed an enthusiastic reception by early residents and the media. Reston's "early pioneers" were quick to contribute to the town's founding principles by, for example, establishing a neighborhood day care system and contributing to weekly meetings on artistic and cultural programming. But investors were somewhat less eager.

When seeking capital for the continued development of Reston, Simon and his team were turned down by 50 different banks that were hesitant to participate in a project that broke from the norm. Large-scale development projects like Reston are capital-intensive in their early years — they require huge amounts of construction and are slow to turn a profit. Few entities had the capital on hand to make a project like Reston happen.

Oil companies were a rare exception. Gulf Oil Corp. became an early investor in Reston, although development was hampered by sluggish housing sales after the initial surge of enthusiasm. Commuting also proved to be a significant challenge. While Reston promised access to retail and some jobs, it remained disconnected from larger job centers in the Washington, D.C., area. Residents often needed to take on long commutes that were counter to the town's promise of living and working in the same place.

Despite early financial struggles, Simon refused to compromise on building materials or design, which drove up construction costs. Three years after Reston's founding, struggles over home sales and development costs came to a head when the Gulf Oil board of directors forced Simon out.

In 1967, Gulf created a subsidiary, Gulf Reston Inc., to manage the project. Gulf prioritized profitability but also largely followed the master plan. Central plazas remained a fixture of the villages, but Gulf emphasized they needed to be profitable.

Still, the social fabric of Reston was woven early on. Even with the management shift, Reston's community values stuck and became an integral part of the town's culture.

"The Next America"

Fifty miles northeast, Columbia, Md., was unveiled on June 21, 1967. This new town was the brainchild of James Rouse, a real estate developer, urban planner, civic activist, and philanthropist. Like Reston, Columbia was built on a vision of livability and integration. Its motto, "The Next America," was meant to capture Rouse's hope that the community could serve as an example of pragmatic utopianism for other communities across the nation — that is, an example of social interaction and harmony that, in Rouse's words, could provide "an alternative to the mindlessness, the irrationality, the unnecessity of sprawl and clutter as a way of accommodating the growth of the American city."

In contrast with Simon's youth in New York City, Rouse grew up in Easton, Md., a small town on the upper Eastern Shore near the Chesapeake Bay. Descriptions of Rouse's childhood are idyllic — an upbringing "right out of small-town Norman Rockwell Americana." Rouse experienced close-knit community and natural beauty from an early age, which would ultimately be coupled with his tenacity, leadership qualities, business acumen, religious convictions, and urban development experience to create the vision for Columbia.

In 1933, Rouse moved to Baltimore and soon entered law school at the University of Maryland. While still in school, and in the midst of the Great Depression, he began working for the Federal Housing Administration. This experience imbued a deep understanding of the housing market, which served Rouse well when in 1951 — after serving in the Navy during World War II and co-founding a mortgage banking company — he chaired the Baltimore Mayor's Advisory Council on Housing Law Enforcement as part of the nationally acclaimed Baltimore Plan to redevelop slums in the city.

While the Baltimore Plan faced various political challenges and was only a partial success, it launched Rouse to the national stage, shaped his commitment to urban renewal, and helped form a conviction that he would espouse for the rest of his life: "We must hold fast to the realization that our cities are for people, and unless they work well for people they are not working well at all."

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Rouse worked on two pivotal large-scale commercial projects: Harundale Mall in Glen Burnie, Md., and Cherry Hill Mall in Cherry Hill, N.J. Harundale was the first enclosed shopping center on the East Coast and helped spark the proliferation of shopping malls nationwide, as well as Rouse's vision of an integrated, amenity-rich community anchored by a shopping mall. Cherry Hill cemented this vision as a town developed organically around the mall (and ultimately, named itself after the shopping center). Rouse reasoned that if he could plan for residential development at the outset in conjunction with shopping, the result could be a model urban center.

Rouse purchased large swaths of land in Howard County, Md., to bring his model city to life. As was the case for Simon in Fairfax County, the local building code needed to be completely rewritten to enable Rouse's urban vision. Howard County's local leaders and existing residents were cautiously optimistic about the project and became more assured with Rouse's release of a master plan simply titled "Columbia." The plan established that the new city would be an environmentally friendly "complete and balanced community" that "set the highest possible standards of beauty, safety and convenience," without tax burdening existing residents or increasing utility costs for the county.

Before construction began, Rouse led a 13-month planning process that brought together experts from a diverse array of fields, such as education, recreation, sociology, housing, religion, government, and medicine. This team helped ensure that Columbia's built design contributed to the high standards of beauty, safety, and convenience promised in the master plan.

The team also helped make sure that Columbia would be economically feasible. Robert Gladstone, a Washington, D.C., economist who sat on the planning team, developed the Columbia Economic Model (CEM), which guided the city's development. The CEM required employees to constantly seek efficiency in all activities and projects and "ensured that all decisions made were economically viable."

The master plan called for the construction of 10 core villages with 5,000 to 10,000 residents each. These villages would surround an enclosed shopping mall. As in Reston and other new towns, the villages were designed to be self-contained communities with diverse housing stock, ample amenities, jobs, and green spaces that enabled a high quality of life. Columbia was also a purposefully integrated community.

Unlike Simon, Rouse was first and foremost a businessman. He did not share Simon's passion for design, and this was apparent in Columbia's housing stock. A typical single-family home in Columbia was designed to be an incremental improvement over existing suburban homes of the day — for example, slightly larger floorplans and more creativity in housing facades and landscaping. These homes felt familiar to consumers, and Columbia did not face the same home sale challenges that Reston did.

Media coverage of Columbia's early years was positive and helped attract new residents who shared Rouse's commitment to inclusivity, civic duty, and the environment. Among these early residents were William and Regina Stebenne, who moved their family from the suburbs of Rhode Island to the Village of Wilde Lake in August 1969.

Columbia founder James Rouse (center) discusses plans with project director William Finley (left) and urban planner Morton Hoppenfeld.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF COLUMBIA ARCHIVES (PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION)

Their son, David Stebenne, is now a historian and author of multiple works on Columbia and is clear about the weaknesses and strengths that were built into the city from the start. "James Rouse was that very unusual American man who was not interested in cars," he says. "One of the greatest failures in terms of overall design was to not do a kind of grid that would facilitate the easier movement of cars." But integration was a success. "Unlike many other sizeable towns that tried to be racially diverse and stable, Columbia succeeded. It was racially diverse from the beginning, and it still is."

Keeping the Vision Alive

In the decades after they were founded, Reston and Columbia each faced challenges, many of which were economic. For Reston, these included investor turnover and tensions between financial viability and commitment to the founding principles. For Columbia, these included reckoning with some design weaknesses — including transportation — and increasing density to develop an economy of scale.

The 1970s, '80s, and '90s saw Reston change hands from Gulf Oil Corp. to Mobil Oil Corp. Like Gulf, Mobil pursued market-based development and followed the master plan to a degree that allowed Simon's vision to remain relatively intact. In 1990, Mobil dedicated Reston Town Center, a mixed-use shopping plaza that was the crown jewel of the town and a central piece of the master plan. The lofty goals established by Simon inspired Mobil's planning team to break from conventional commercial design — ultimately, Reston Town Center was created as a place for people to spend their time, in addition to their money.

Similarly, Columbia was not immune to business cycles and faced its share of financial challenges over the years. But, as David Stebenne points out, Columbia was the only one of the suburban "new towns" of the later 1960s and '70s in which the original developer was able to retain long-term control over the project.

Three primary factors enabled Rouse to maintain control. First was the conventional nature of the housing stock. Second was Columbia's concentration of business parks. Both supported the economic viability of the development through home sales, commercial leasing income, and job creation. Third was the close professional relationship that Rouse developed with Frazar Wilde, president of Connecticut General Life Insurance Co., the investment firm that financed the majority of Columbia's early development. Wilde focused on long-term profitability and also viewed Columbia as a project worthy of investment for reasons beyond profitability, which mitigated the pressure that large-scale development projects face to turn a profit as soon as possible. As David Stebenne notes, "To the extent there are compromises, they don't stem from a lack of knowledge on the part of the developer … they stem more from larger macroeconomic forces beyond Rouse's control."

After his retirement from the Rouse Company in 1979, Rouse dove back into urban redevelopment through malls that he called "festival marketplaces." These projects included Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace and Quincy Market and Baltimore's Harborplace, which were meant to help revive downtown areas by creating an amenity-rich destination for residents and tourists alike. Simon, meanwhile, moved back to New York to manage smaller-scale development projects but retired to Reston's Lake Anne neighborhood in 1993. He lived in his beloved community until his death in 2015 at the age of 101.

Towns in Progress

Reston and Columbia continue to be thriving communities that must navigate new challenges that come with age. As each passed its 50th anniversary, conversations began about redevelopment.

Part of Reston's continued vibrancy stems from its location in a region experiencing rapid economic growth, and more recent planning has had to account for that growth. A central innovation of Reston's current Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2015, was a minimum 1-to-1 ratio of residential to nonresidential development for the areas around Reston transit stations, including Reston Town Center. According to Robert Goudie, executive director of the Reston Town Center Association, the ratio — which had not been widely attempted in other mixed-use developments — was designed to set a minimum requirement on residential in the downtown and thereby "create a healthier jobs-to-households ratio in what previously were areas zoned largely or exclusively commercial and mitigate congestion."

The Washington, D.C., Metro extended a line to Reston in 2014, and Fairfax County continues to review key elements of the Comprehensive Plan in anticipation of additional transit development and population growth. Increased demand and redevelopment costs raise the cost of living and challenge Reston's original commitment to affordability.

The "Downtown Columbia Plan" details Columbia's planned development from 2010 through 2040. This plan balances growth with Rouse's original principles and details a process for community involvement. Transportation continues to be a struggle for the area as more and more Columbia residents face long commutes to Baltimore or Washington, D.C.

Reston and Columbia illustrate the economic complexities that exist within a large-scale planned community, and they share some commonalities that may have contributed to their relative success. These include the early establishment of core values, innovative zoning, and prioritization of profitability. Simon and Rouse's clear and public core values defined standards by which all design and business decisions could be assessed and simultaneously attracted like-minded residents who helped make those values a deep-rooted part of the community culture.

Reston and Columbia were pioneers in mixed-use zoning; today, mixed-use zoning and transit-oriented development are priorities for many localities across the United States, particularly those seeking to increase density and provide accessible amenities. The examples set by Reston and Columbia — including their more recent and ongoing conversations about transit design and the appropriate mix of residential and commercial development — have helped inform the development of mixed-use zoning nationally.

Finally, Reston and Columbia indicate the importance of the "mix" in mixed-use development — Goudie in Reston and David Stebenne in Columbia both note that commercial development provided critical income to help maintain economic viability. Even with the changes that Reston and Columbia have seen over the decades, it seems clear that their conversations about community, diversity, quality of life, and economic viability may never be over — they will simply evolve. **EF**

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