

Columbia, Maryland: A New American City?

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On June 21, 1967, shopping center developer James Rouse broke ground for his biggest project to date: Columbia, Maryland. Rouse had spent the past few years buying up farmland in Howard County, in a strategic location directly between Washington, DC, and Baltimore. The plan Rouse had was ambitious. Not only would he be building an entire town from practically nothing, but Rouse was also focused on erasing economic and social lines among its residents. Rouse envisioned single-family homes next to low-income apartment complexes, next to modest townhomes. The grand plan that the Rouse company put forward saw ten villages, a thriving town center, and opportunities to work both within Columbia or commute out to either of the metropolises at its north and south.

A quick glance might render Columbia a success. Fifty years later, Columbia is a thriving suburb, often recognized on lists as one of the best places to live in America. It seems that some of Jim Rouse's more unconventional ideas--no individual mailboxes, incredibly unique street names, and little directional signage--have proven to be a unifying thread for Columbians. "You Know You Grew Up In Columbia MD When," a popular Facebook group with nearly 8,000 members, is full of fond memories, memorable stories, and even the odd event organization. Columbians populate the group with interesting discussion about the streets they grew up on. Lately, however, the group has seemed to turn more towards the impending changes to the Columbia they know and love.

In November of 2016, the Howard County Council passed a plan for the revitalization of downtown. In some ways, it was necessary; there are zones of downtown that are not easily accessible and are dead most hours of the day. However, many residents took to social media to protest. While some simply did not want the town to change, others argued that James Rouse's original vision was being compromised. A downtown lakefront staple, the American City Building, is slated for demolition in favor of repurposing the land as greenspace for the condominiums going up nearby. In a September 2017 comment thread on Facebook in response to this news, citizens aired their disapproval: "I am so glad I am [no] longer there and am not seeing the devolution of Rouse's plan," stated Lydia

Hatch. Cindy Ryan wrote that even though the downtown Columbia redevelopment plan speaks about how Rouse wished to operate on a "human scale," they are misappropriating the term by applying it to parking garages. Kerry Martin further complained that "'they' have been putting words in James Rouse's mouth for years." Despite public discontent, demolishing the American City Building should hardly be a debate; while many citizens have fond memories of the building, myself included, the building has sat mostly empty for years. This, along with the luxury apartments with rents upwards of \$2,000 and the repurposing of the Frank Gehry-designed Rouse Company building as a Whole Foods, has shaken up Columbia natives.

Despite this well-documented protest, Howard Hughes Corporation and other developers continue to move forward. "This is what's known as turning Columbia into downtown silver spring building by building," wrote Facebook user Steven Carillo. However, despite all this public disapproval, is developing Columbia into a more modern city truly against the vision of James Rouse? In this paper, I will examine the history of Columbia, its development thus far, and the plans Howard Hughes Corporation and other developers have put forth. Though the face of Columbia will be changing in the coming years, the town should be seen as evolving, rather than completely abandoning its original intent. At its core, Columbia will maintain the town it is by adhering to the values established by James Rouse from the town's very inception.



Columbia's first baby, a biracial boy, became a symbol for the town's goal of inclusivity.

Clandestine Beginnings

In November 1962, 1,039 acres were purchased in Howard County, Maryland. In the next year, 14,000 acres would be quietly purchased by James Rouse, shopping center developer (“Timeline”). Howard County residents had a number of suspicions, but Rouse did not reveal himself and his plans to build a city until October 1964 (Stamp). In the following years, Rouse and his planners outlined a plan for a city of ten villages, each with retailers and a community center, as well as stipulations for recreation, transportation, and a thriving town center. On June 21, 1967, the first village, Wilde Lake, was dedicated. A month after Columbia’s dedication, the first citizens moved into the Wilde Lake neighborhood (“Timeline”). Jim Rouse outlined four goals in his hopes for Columbia, as recorded by Maryland journalist and Columbia native, Len Lazarick: Firstly, Rouse placed great value on the respect of nature. Columbia is known for its miles of winding footpaths foliage throughout the town. Secondly, Columbia was envisioned as a town for the growth of people. James Rouse believed that the success of a town was measured in its ability to develop and contribute to mankind. Thirdly, Rouse developed Columbia with the mindset that it would become a complete city. Lastly, Columbia was always intended to turn a profit, although this did not occur until ten years after the initial prediction (Lazarick). In the fifty subsequent years, nine more villages have been established, and the town population has grown to around 100,000 residents (“QuickFacts”).

A Tool for Gentrification?

This past summer, Columbia celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. As the Columbia Association kicked off a summer of celebration across the town, residents couldn’t help but be hyper-aware of the new construction downtown. In January of 2004, the county rejected a plan to add nearly 2,000 new residences (“Timeline”). However, just because the county struck it down once, did not mean that motions did not continue to be put forward to redevelop the downtown area. While certain parts of the town were thriving, in the fifty years since its founding, some areas had become “dead zones.” A prime example of one of these “dead zones” was, in fact, the first village center: Wilde Lake.

From 2002-2015, I saw the decline of the village center and beginnings of its revitalization, as I attended church, camp, and high school within the confines of that village center. Wilde Lake used to have a post

office, fast food, a Giant food store, and two health food stores, among numerous smaller shops. As the years went by, retailers began to close up shop; by 2010, all that was left were a few small retailers, a barber shop, and one of those health food stores. It was nowhere near as thriving as any of the nearby villages, such as Harper's Choice or Hickory Ridge, despite being close to the downtown area and surrounded by housing. In May 2013, redevelopment was approved for the village center, and bigger retailers began moving in: a CVS, Indian and Chinese restaurants, a smoothie bar, and most recently, a Starbucks ("Village Center Redevelopment"). Today, Wilde Lake is well populated during the day. However, along with the retailers to kickstart the economic aspect of the village center, another aspect of the plan raised concerns among residents.



Alta Wilde Lake

The area immediately surrounding the Wilde Lake village center is made up of a number of smaller apartments and condos. James Rouse intended for Columbia to defy traditional housing lines, and in Columbia proper, he got most of the way there. Wilde Lake supports a number of low-income families with both affordable apartments and Section 8 housing. However, in the redevelopment plan, planners included Alta Wilde Lake. This was a luxury high-rise apartment building, which seems rather out of place in a village of low two-story buildings. The cheapest unit at Alta, a one bedroom, one bathroom, comes in at \$1,755 a month; it is safe to say that given the current economic makeup of the area, this will not be an apartment building that current residents will be moving into.

Alta Wilde Lake is, in many Columbians' eyes, a tool of gentrification. However, Jim Rouse himself might disagree. As he intended Columbia to erase socio-economic lines, especially in the era of civil rights, would he not support the building of a luxury apartment complex just a

few cul-de-sacs down from a Section 8 community? Whether Alta Wilde Lake will thrive, considering its high rent, has yet to be determined. Perhaps it can take a hint from grander-scale development just down Twin Rivers Road.

Columbia: The Next Bethesda?

A drive through Columbia in 2003 is quite different from the Columbia you see outside the car windows today. A cruise down Little Patuxent Parkway would show a number of bland office buildings, surrounding a popular enclosed shopping mall. Further down, the man-made Lake Kittamaqundi hosted a few restaurants on its waterfront, the Frank Gehry-designed Rouse Building, and a walking path that did not fully encircle the lake. While this lakefront area was popular for Fourth of July fireworks, it was often out of reach for most residents. Driving is necessary in Columbia, a fact lamented by all high school students who do not yet have their licenses. Walking paths, though existent in 2003, were more for recreational walking, rather than getting anywhere efficiently. The Howard County Transit Bus, not-so-fondly called the Green Bus, was hardly reliable; schedules were unclear, and service was spotty. Jim Rouse's dream of a thriving, walkable city was poorly realized.

A jaunt down the same streets today tells an improving story. A number of new modern buildings have gone up, which update the overall age of the town. Sidewalks have been extended downtown, making travel easier for pedestrians. At the lakefront, the building that was once headquarters of the Rouse Company is now a Whole Foods, with a members-only day spa on the lake-level floor. A music venue is going into one of the restaurant spaces along the lake, and Merriweather Post Pavilion, just up the street, has been updated to increase seating space in the main pavilion and on the lawn, as well as building a new stage, the Chrysalis, on the property. The transportation has been handed over to the Regional Transit Agency of Central Maryland, which travels as far south as to College Park, and north to Ellicott City and Catonsville (Regional Transit Agency). For all intents and purposes, it seems as though Columbia is back on track, development-wise.

Some of the newest buildings downtown are the luxury apartments facing the mall, The Metropolitan and the nearly finished m.flats. These buildings have greatly changed the landscape of the mall area and tower over the neighboring downtown apartment complexes. Like Alta Wilde

Lake, the apartments are expensive, and residents are concerned about how they change the landscape of the downtown area, as well as the housing situation for low-income families. Though the official plan to redevelop was passed by the Howard County Board in November 2016, it was not without controversy regarding a stipulation to secure low-income housing (Waseem).

Controversial Planning Nearing the Bicentennial



Downtown Columbia new apartments,
artist's rendition.

During Columbia's initial planning, Jim Rouse set a benchmark of 10 percent for low- and moderate-income housing (Scruggs). In creating the new plan for Columbia, this came under debate. The "Terrasa plan," as it became known, called for Columbia to adopt the current county-wide 15 percent requirement to provide low-income housing. The alternative plan provided for units, both permanently affordable and others utilized as such, to be leased as low-income units for 40 years (Scruggs). Despite widespread support for the Terrasa plan, the second proposal was voted into action. In building these apartments, the Howard Hughes Corporation, which is funding the redevelopment of downtown, became non-responsive to continued inquiries about building these low- and moderate-income units. Only after what Scruggs describes as "Councillor Mary Kay Sigaty [knocking] heads" was a compromise reached, with the Howard Hughes Corporation agreeing to the 40-year stipulation, as well as donating land to develop further low-income units in future mixed-use buildings (Scruggs).



The People Tree at Lakefront

The New Columbia plan acknowledges that business has moved out of the Downtown area into the eastward Gateway Park area. In order to re-establish itself as a place to live and work, as well as to take advantage of its prime location between Baltimore and DC, the redevelopment must aim to revitalize the business park of the town (Howard County Council 20). Unlike most malls today, the mall in Columbia is thriving, with a large movie theatre and restaurants surrounding it. Recently, the County has introduced community bikes, with docks downtown and at the community college.

In contrasting the Columbia of 2018 with the Columbia of 2003, the differences are clear. 2003 Columbia was a city approaching its last leg, more of an office park than the thriving downtown Rouse pictured. Today, that picture is being realized more clearly than ever. In coping with the changing fabric of the city, there are a number of things that must be remembered. For developers, Columbia is not a town of chance. Every aspect of Columbia was planned, and although not all of these plans came to fruition, it is important to remember the core values of socio-economic equality that Jim Rouse, and so many residents after him, value Columbia for. What will keep Columbia from becoming a carbon-copy of Bethesda

will be adherence to those values. For residents, in a time of frustration and distaste for development, Rouse reminds us of his fourth value: To make a profit. No city is sustainable if it is not making a profit; economic downturn is what kept Columbia in the 1970s from having the accessible downtown it is seeking today. Pressure must be exerted upon developers to ensure that planning adheres to Columbia's values, but outside of this, development is what James Rouse envisioned: a fully functional city, along the corridor between Baltimore and Washington, to bring together citizens of all class, creed, and race, in one great idea to develop the New American City.

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