



Building for the New America

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) October 1, 2015

As I leave the front door of my townhouse in Baltimore's Village of Cross Keys, I am only a few hundred yards from a high-rise apartment building. The rectilinear lines of Harper House, designed by a young, unknown Canadian-born architect working in the 1960s for the Rouse Company, are a far cry from the curvilinear creations for which the now world famous designer, Frank Gehry, is best known.

Walking a little further, I pass by Roland Green, a latter-day addition to the Cross Keys housing mix, having been built a little over 15 years ago, with large attached single-family homes containing floor areas the equal of many houses in contemporary suburban developments. A few minutes walking further downhill brings me to the Village Square, the small-scale shopping center created a half century ago to serve the basic consumer needs of Village residents.

Communities weren't built this way in mid-20th century America. But James Rouse thought differently – townhouses, high rises and garden apartments and the people who dwell in them can co-exist. It has been said that Rouse was using Cross Keys as a trial run for a much more ambitious development that he then had on the drawing boards in the mid-1960s: Columbia New Town. This new community, located on what was then over 6,700 acres of Howard County farmland between Baltimore and Washington, D.C., was in the early stages of planning when another major planned community, Reston, was just getting started in Northern Virginia.

A true visionary

These thoughts come to mind with the news of the recent passing at age 101 of Robert E. Simon, the visionary behind Reston. Simon had a visceral and personal connection to his creation. The name of the new town is derived from the initials of Simon's own name. Simon's vision, like Rouse's, did not stop at the physical design of the new development. With its mix of housing types — and the variety of price points they provided — Reston's design embodied Simon's goal of creating a culturally diverse and racially integrated mini-city.

In The Washington Post obituary for Simon we are reminded that he was building his development on a tract of 7,300 acres in Fairfax County in a 1960s Virginia that still made

interracial marriage illegal. With the intent of marketing Reston's housing to all races and a wide range of income levels, Simon was flouting many of the then-prevailing real estate conventions. The Post's account goes on to report Simon saying in an interview that, "Real estate agents steered buyers away from Reston because they said it was 'communist' ... It was the black thing, of course – the integration. And the townhouses. There were no townhouses in the boonies until Reston."

As the civil rights movement was advancing during the 1960s, rare businessmen such as James Rouse and Robert Simon saw themselves as building communities for a New America, communities that could bring together people of different cultural backgrounds, races and economic circumstances.

Today's reality

A half century later, both Columbia and Reston have met some of their goals and fallen short in others. Columbia has grown to be Maryland's largest unincorporated city with a population of over 100,000 but with a smaller employment base than originally envisioned. Many of its residents must still commute into the job centers of D.C. and greater Baltimore. Reston has a more balanced jobs-housing mix, having become home to 62,000 residents and 55,000 jobs. With the extension of the Metro system's Silver Line to Reston Town Center, Reston can enjoy closer economic ties to other parts of the greater Washington region. Both of these new towns have achieved a degree of racial and ethnic diversity, but they are less diverse in terms of income levels, skewing towards middle class and higher. And the originally conceived town centers of Columbia, for which my Village Square served as a prototype, no longer make economic sense in the era of big box retailing.

Still, as racial strife from Ferguson to Baltimore over the past year once again has revealed the great divide between majority white and minority communities, we are reminded that Americans can still gain from the lessons of two towering community builders, Rouse and Simon. As demographic forces, including immigration, move the nation towards ever greater diversity, we must find ways to create communities that incorporate the reality of the New America – a nation consisting of people representing many different cultures, creeds and life circumstances.

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