

# A planned community matures

By: Joe Nathanson March 25, 2022

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The plaque had been missing for some months. But, a few days ago, it reappeared in its new location near the newly reconfigured entrance to the Village of Cross Keys in north Baltimore. The plaque sits in front of a sculpture dedicated to the founder of Cross Keys, James W. Rouse. The inscription of the plaque reads: "Jim Rouse proved we could reclaim and recreate our urban frontiers. His life was defined by faith in the American spirit, and he showed us that we could build communities worthy of the character and optimism of our people." — President Bill Clinton

As it turned out, Cross Keys, a community of about 900 residents, was a trial run for Jim Rouse's much more ambitious development — the planned community of Columbia, located on 14,000 acres in Howard County, between Baltimore and Washington. Starting development in the mid-1960s, Columbia eventually came to comprise 10 residential villages, each with its own neighborhood center, a downtown core consisting of a shopping mall and commercial offices, and a combined population of just over 100,000.

To Jim Rouse the project was always more than just a large real estate development. He wanted to create a community providing a high quality of life to its residents, with a wide range of amenities close to home, and one that eliminated the divisions, found in too many other places, between race, class, and creed.

For many years the founder's vision for Columbia satisfied the needs of many. But as personal tastes and market forces changed the landscape, there were indications that Columbia was fraying. Some of the original village centers had lost key tenants and vacancy rates were high. Downtown Columbia also was underperforming as a retail and cultural center. Columbia needed an injection of new energy.

## **Revitalization underway**

The Howard Hughes Corporation is now the second-generation successor to the Rouse Company and has been active over the past decade in generating plans for Downtown Columbia and now is in the process of implementing them.

The company's initial focus has been the Merriweather District, which it plans to transform into growing business district, with a walkable urban core consisting of 2,300 new residences, a 250-room hotel, over 1.5 million square feet of office space, along with new street retail

and green space. A new addition to the district is The Metropolitan, Downtown Columbia's first multi-family project and new Class-A mixed-use office buildings.

The developers are also undertaking a major renovation of the Merriweather Post Pavilion, which has been a popular entertainment venue for decades. The expanded facility is seen as serving as a catalyst for the creation of an arts and culture magnet for the wider region. Most recently, Howard Hughes has announced its plans for the Lakefront District, with an investment of approximately \$325 million in the area of Downtown Columbia adjoining Lake Kittamaquidi. This latest development will include a \$45.8 million, four-story, 86,000 square foot state-of-the-art medical office building, additional housing options, retail offerings and enhanced connections to the natural environment.

At full build-out, three districts, Merriweather, Lakefront and a still in the early planning stage Central district, will comprise more than 14 million square feet of mixed-use development as well as over 6,200 residential units, 640 hotel rooms, new arts and cultural attractions, along with public parks, trails, and other amenities.

### **A resident's perspective**

Bob Lefenfeld is a housing market analyst who has lived in and maintained an office in Columbia for a number of years. He welcomes the reinvigoration of Columbia's downtown: "After 20 years of inaction, redevelopment of Columbia started about 10 years ago with the new rental communities around and near the mall and the redevelopment of the Rouse (the American City Corporation) building into a Whole Foods. Between the Merriweather District and redevelopment of the Lakefront, Downtown Columbia is poised to emerge as a more dynamic live/work/play urban center of the county, with entertainment/recreation venues interspersed throughout the area. For the 20 years we have had an office in downtown, most of our young staff commuted from Baltimore and Washington. I can see that changing as the downtown evolves."

Both Caves Valley Partners in the case of Cross Keys and the Howard Hughes Corporation in Columbia have big shoes to fill. We can hope that they infuse their respective communities with quality design, along with the optimism and generosity of spirit that guided the work of Jim Rouse.

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