

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL-27

COLUMBIA: One Night in May

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

In an age bankrupt of philosopher kings, philosophic real estate developers are unlikely secular substitutes, but then there is Jim Rouse, who believes cities are gardens for growing people. Rouse, a successful businessman, once told a Congressional Committee:

"I believe that the ultimate test of civilization is whether or not it contributes to the growth and improvement of mankind. Does it uplift, inspire, stimulate and develop the best in man? There really can be no other right purpose of community except to provide an environment and an opportunity to develop better people. The most successful community would be that which contributed the most by its physical form, its institutions and its operation to the growth of people."

And, at Columbia, the new city his company is building on the corridor between Washington and Baltimore, he is trying to create a successful community.

Defining the good environment for Columbia included a nearly unique, and subsequently well publicized social planning phase in the form of a series of intensive, but free wheeling discussions among a thoughtfully selected group of experts and consultants whose specialities ranged from family and community structure and public administration, to education, health, traffic and transportation. The work group seminars did not produce a blueprint, nor were they expected to; however, the stress members placed on communication, both as interchange and access, had some objective effect on the physical plan, such as the location and arrangement of the schools and transit systems, the cooperative ministry, the community centers. It had even more influence on social planning for Columbia, with the Johns Hopkins pre-paid health plan the most elaborate example. The impact of the work group's convictions on the already committed Rouse and his senior staff who believed that Columbia could really become a new and successful city are only revealing themselves over time, as each phase is reached.

Almost everywhere except in the United States, the head of state is separate from the head of government, and, whether produced by evolution or revolution, the fact of separation is not only a living convenience, but also an example and an organizational model for institutions other than national government. The British new town development corporations tidily separate titular and active authority in sturdy British fashion. The Chairman and the boards of each corporation, appointed by the Crown through the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, are well known, respected and responsible individuals who, for pay, take formal responsibility for the development and management of the towns. Until very recently no local residents were members of corporations. The always distinguished Chairman is certainly non resident. At regular meetings and public occasions of ritual importance the Chairman is the visible and gracious personification of the new town. The board appoints the general manager and it is he who runs the machinery, preferably as discreetly as possible.

The new towns development corporations have drawn considerable senior administrative personnel from the Colonial Service which, in the height of Empire, developed notions of indirect rule into nearly religious convictions that were broadly adapted to the new towns for want of any other philosophy. The combination of rather rigid administrative and class assumptions of the senior civil servants toward the community, although they did live in the towns, plus the traditionally rigid notions of physical planners who dreamed the dream of social prediction through architecture, couldn't help but contribute unnecessary strain to spontaneous development of indigenous, civic groups. The implicit administrative disdain towards unsponsored or unexpected community activity or participation complimented the idea the Tory government of the 50's benignly neglected, and which therefore flourished: that the new towns were rather dead ended, working class towns.

Eventually, of course, new town residents, like people living any place else, developed groups and institutions that absorbed and complemented their energies.

One of the reasons Harlow is generally considered the most successful of the new towns is the number and vigor of its community organizations and institutions. Professor Maurice Broady of Southampton has recently completed the first phase of a study of Harlow, which suggests a theoretical and a personnel explanation. From the opening of the first community association meeting room at Moot House the Harlow Development Corporation established and adhered to the "principle of supporting community activities officially, while leaving the responsibility for their

conduct in the hands of the people themselves." Professor Broady cites a number of examples of the Development Corporation's willingness to collaborate with community groups in response to expressed interest--the Music Association and Art Council, the health center group practices, and, best known, the Sports Centre, run by a Trust whose board is composed equally of representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies. This probably does not seem extraordinary to you, but, by British standards the Harlow Development Corporation's responsive social policies, providing organizers, space, and seed money to get things started and then getting out of the way, sounds very innovative, very free, and very American.

At the close of his paper Professor Broady stands back from theories of social development and comments on the importance of three key personalities in Harlow's early years. The first general manager of the corporation, Eric Adams, through discretionary exercise of his own powers and enthusiastic support of his staff, set the tone. He also selected Sewell Harris, a remarkable Quaker, to be the first Warden of Moot House. It was Harris who kept the meeting place humming and, in effect, ran a non-stop training program for community organizers. Adams also brought Len White out to be Liason Officer to combine community relations, information and research in one catalytic department, which he has done with unflagging enthusiasm. In other words, paper policies are just paper, and the variables of imaginative administration and implementation are changing because they do depend on individuals.

The Harlow studies harmonize with the pluralistic theories of the advocacy planners in the United States. They recognize the political nature of community development and the need for open ended flexibility, but ultimately they beg the question of initial citizen participation. An intentionally developed new town, whether publicly or privately financed, is built according to a land use plan that defines the town's physical goals, implies social goals, and is prepared before construction begins. In public (in this case British) and private (American) new town experiments, initial, spontaneous community organization naturally focuses on the plan, its promises and the developers' adherence to them.

The California sociologist, Carl Werthman, thinks that in the United States, community planning, in the sense of beyond household environment developed and controlled by plan, is a considerably less important factor in the decision to buy a house than either the location of the house or its floor plan. Moreover, he thinks

that the appeal of a planned community is positive only in the sense of being a relief from anxiety "associated with personally uncontrollable change"...that would effect the value and desirability of the house, and the planning projects a "class image." The strongest support to his arguments comes from residents of the various retirement colonies, which successfully advertise a particular and exclusive kind of community life. Professor Werthman studied several elaborate California sub-divisions that advertise their community and/or recreational features, and drew his conclusions from intensive interviews with residents.

Columbia is far more elaborately planned than any of the developments Werthman studied, but some of his conclusions probably apply even at this early stage of development when new town messianism runs high. Columbia residents in casual conversation offer rationales of conscience, conviction, and economics. Conscience and conviction are tightly meshed--young, middle class, liberal families, black and white, in the Baltimore-Washington area who feel forced to leave the center city where they lived as singles, courted, married and lived conveniently before the children were born, stress the importance of moving someplace where those children can go to integrated public schools. The convenience/location factor that Werthman found so important in California housing--the half hour drive to work--doesn't count for much in Columbia yet. Indeed, the commute to Washington is grueling--at least an hour each way and often more--an acknowledged sacrifice for the men who do it every day. What does count is that housing buys at Columbia, given the inflated market, are good--not architecture, as at Reston, but well calculated as to interior, giving living space value. The population, stretching across the broad ranks of the middle class, in housing that ranges from subsidized to luxury standard, is heading towards 9,000.

The sociologist Herbert Gans contributed an outline, "Planning for the Everyday Life and Problems of Suburban and New Town Residents," to the work group that straightforwardly dealt with the inevitable kinds of conflicts that would arise, and commented on the kinds of attitudes and procedures that help reduce or ease them without stifling diversity or heterogeneity. Gans included family, economic interest and political conflicts and touched lightly on "resident builder" and "newness" conflicts, neither of which he considered serious or lasting. Along with Leonard Duhl, the mental health planner and psychiatrist, Gans emphasized the value of feedback mechanisms and overt discussion of controversies as well as conflicts in the new community. Other members of the work group stressed the range of activities in the new town involving residents and developer that would be governmental or quasi-governmental.

Gans' observations about resident-builder conflict were based on his own work in Park Forest, Illinois and Levittown, New Jersey, two classical middle class suburban bedroom communities built by a classic "merchant-builder" rather than a "community builder." In their book The Community Builders Marshall Kaplan and Edward Eichler developed some of the distinctions between the two, noting "Both seek profits from real estate development. But the merchant-builder expects these profits from the rapid turnover of a product which he manufactures and merchandises to the consumers; the community builder's profits will come mainly in the latter stages of a long range undertaking." Rouse and Co., rather than fading from view as Columbia develops, are omnipresent in their new city; indeed, the company, which has extensive real estate interests around the country, particularly in shopping centers, has moved its offices into the second commercial building.

Columbia, whatever it is, or becomes, is unlikely to be duplicated because the necessary start up capital just isn't around. Cynics think the Rouse Company, which borrowed \$50 million from Connecticut General Life Insurance interest free for ten years, will make money from the commercial development of Columbia just as the mathematical model says, but that Connecticut General would have had a better return on its investment buying drab municipal bonds. The giant corporations that considered city building an attractive investment possibility in the mid-sixties have all backed off, and the federal guarantee provisions in the Omnibus Housing Act of 1968 are relatively modest.

The variable that makes Columbia really different from the merchant-built communities and the orthodox new towns is the personality of the titular and administrative leader, the merchant philosopher, James Rouse. Experimental and utopian communities usually form around the convictions of one man; American history is rife with obscure examples of them. Although in spirit Columbia is closer to the utopian communities than it is to the giant tracts, it is designed on truly urban scale--a population of 100,000 plus, and for profit.

Rouse, a deeply religious and concerned man, is thoughtful and articulate, and aware of the responsibilities of being a community leader as well as commercial developer. He and his staff realize that their testimonial definition of Columbia will be taken as gospel in the sense of glad tidings about salvation, in this case urban salvation, by the residents.

Columbia is unmistakably American in many ways. Nearby Reston, which was also begun as a new town, even now, after several years of direct control by Gulf-Reston, the subsidiary of

Gulf Oil that took over from Robert E. Simon who dreamed the dream, has a European air of elegance in its architecture and elaborate physical detailing, preoccupation with design and design implications. By contrast the physical structures of Columbia are nearly drab, or at least undistinguished--hopefully ordinary and comfortable--the way American towns and cities are. It is also typically American that the head of the community is the head of the corporation. If the concentration of function and symbol is a strain it is one that Americans never stop to consider, having known no other system.

The strain at Columbia is probably greatest right now and for the next two to five years. Right now the Rouse Company owns and runs Columbia. Individual homeowners and residents belong to the community associations, but the governing boards are filled entirely with Rouse Company staff. Gradually the community will take over the seats and with them, control of Columbia. Meanwhile the resolution of natural daily aggravations and skirmishes reflects the integrity of the staff, rather than the community. And the shadow of Jim Rouse presides everywhere that he is not present. His convictions lured the residents, the symphony, the college students, and his business practices lured General Electric, which will bring 12,000 workers. The necessary duality of his activities--businessman and Patriarch--seems to Columbia residents both reassuring and threatening, and therefore paradoxical.

On the first Wednesday in May over dinner in the elegant lakeside restaurant at Columbia, I listened to some nascent community leaders--active citizens discuss new town living with a representative of an English new town development corporation. The Americans were fascinated to learn details of pre-planning meetings, planning review boards that are standard operating procedure available for citizen participation in Harlow. I was interested in hearing their views of developments at Columbia. Their frustration with general civic apathy seemed perfectly normal to me, as did their anxiety over community control of facilities and the responsiveness to their specific needs of the Columbia Association. It was a delicious dinner. The unusually cold day was ending with a fiery autumn colored sunset when we finally adjourned to the meeting.

The Other Barn. How chic. A charming old barn smartly painted and lettered on the outside, transformed into a community center on the inside. It's the "other" village center, as well as the Other Barn, located across the highway from the Wilde Lake, the first village at Columbia, and the future City Center. It's a symbol of continuity too, a barn linking the new town with the rich farm lands that now underlie it.

The parking lots were full of big American station wagons, VW's, and sports cars. A few had dittoed signs grimly lettered: Cambodia and Kent State, with announcements of this meeting. The meeting was called in haste, word was passed by phone and ditto. No time for big posters or newspaper announcements. Someone said it was the students from Antioch, which has a new branch at Columbia, who organized the meeting, but no one was certain, and, in the event, it didn't matter. It appeared that at least half the adult residents of Columbia cared enough to register their despair, anxiety and confusion as a community.

The main meeting room, upstairs, was filled. Loudspeakers carried the smooth sound of Jim Rouse's voice downstairs where people sat on folded chairs, stood quietly in the corridors, or paced softly with drowsy infants in their arms. The faces were all solemn and earnest--the scattered teenagers looked especially bleak. Liberal, honest, middle class Americans who felt helpless, the Columbians had gathered together with every expectation, spoken or not, that Rouse would be there and would offer leadership, as the visible head of the community. And, of course, he did. After decrying the invasion of Cambodia and the student deaths in Ohio, Rouse read from telegram correspondence with Columbia's Congressman, Gilbert Gude, who agreed with their shock and anxiety, but was unable to attend their meeting. Then, Rouse spoke of appeals, "what we can do" and organized letter writing before he turned the meeting over to others. We left before the meeting ended, sure that Columbians would, indeed, write lots of letters. By Memorial Day the campaign begun that night had swollen until a committee of Columbia staff and residents chaired by James and Elizabeth Rouse took a full page ad in the Sunday New York Times News of the Week in Review.

Letter writing campaigns, which seem innocent, hopeful, frustrating and ultimately futile to the more radical, are nevertheless a beginning stage of politicization, and for some, perhaps as essential a stage as teething. The letter writing campaign strikes me as less important than the meetings and the reinforcement of the sense of community at Columbia, as though the national crisis fertilized the people-growing garden.

If Rouse's beliefs in the cultivation of the human spirit translates into provisional administration, a marvelous phrase the English sometimes use, meaning giving facilities to the community before the request is articulated (and always makes me think of Spock-reared children or a diet of Creative Playthings), his lavish willingness to give, and to lead, is painfully singular.

All the way back to Washington, that chill May night, I kept wondering how the citizens of Columbia would have felt if Rouse had dissociated himself from that meeting. I could not imagine it, and neither, I suspect, could they.

Sincerely,

Eisenfoss Lipson