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# The Next America Revisited

*David M. Levinson*

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*To build a better city is to work at the heart of civilization.*

—Mort Hoppenfeld, Director of Planning  
and Design, Columbia, Maryland

Its Rouse Company founders ambitiously acclaimed Columbia, Maryland, “The Next America” when opened in 1967. It promised to be a private sector implementation of the Great Society’s ideals. Columbia’s designers concerned themselves not only with the physical form of this planned new town,<sup>1</sup> but with social interaction, harmony, and justice as well. However, its creators were quite specific in claiming not to be utopian (Hoppenfeld 1967, Breckenfeld 1971), and comments of citizens confirm that “if you compare Columbia to your image of utopia, it will be a big disappointment. If you compare it to the suburbs west of Baltimore, it is a pretty good place in which to live” (Campbell 1976, 93). While not attempting to restructure economics or alienate fundamental human behaviors, it did try to refashion society through design elements in its physical and social plans. This *pragmatic utopianism* of Columbia’s planners led them to offer a vision of the best of all *possible worlds*, attempting to perfect society without claiming to have built a perfect one. Their goals were the following:

1. To build a whole city—not just a better suburb.
2. To respect the land.
3. To provide an environment favorable to the growth of the individual and family.
4. To make a profit (and thereby encourage future developers). (Columbia Association 2001)

To reach those goals, a number of strategies were undertaken. To develop a complete city, integration was important: include jobs, houses, school, and the places where people undertake life’s other activities (shop, religion, recreation, etc.); integrate the socioeconomic classes; and integrate the races. To respect the land, the planners included an extensive park system, prohibited building in flood plains, and so forth. To help people grow, social services were incorporated as elements in the plan. And to

## Abstract

This article examines Columbia, Maryland, called “The Next America” by its founders in 1967. It compares the planning goals and actual achievements over the third of a century that the city has existed. The physical plan and social plan are discussed in turn, and their reinforcing aspects are considered. Issues of community and identity, racial integration, education, religion, transportation, shopping, work, and parks are addressed. Many of the goals have been achieved; others have fallen short or evolved over time.

**Keywords:** *Columbia, Maryland; master planned community; new town; James Rouse*

**David M. Levinson** is an assistant professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

make a profit, commerce was privileged to certain aesthetic aspects such as architecture.

Today, Columbia approaches middle age and is almost complete on the residential side. So, how did Columbia turn out? I ask this question from a unique perspective, not only as a planner but also as someone raised in and with Columbia (we were both born in 1967). From the time I moved there at the age of five, I began exploring Columbia with the knowledge that it was not like everywhere else, and I continued those observations through college. After a five-year absence, I recently returned to Columbia to see it afresh. This article, therefore, embodies much first-person observation. This unique perspective will contribute to the literature of numerous articles, papers, theses, and dissertations that discuss various aspects of the Columbia experience, including several by resident sociologists (Ben Zadok 1981, Burkhart 1981) and authors (Chabon 2001).

Communities, like the people who live in them, are not static entities; no initial plan can hold up in its entirety over thirty years. Throughout this article, I consider several questions:

- To what extent is the initial plan still evident?
- What have the planners and residents tried to change?
- What might they try to change in the future?
- What lessons are thus learned?

When writing this article, I played with a number of possible organizational structures. As a planner, organizing by land use makes some sense. As someone interested in time use, organizing by activity has an internal logic. A sociologist might be interested in race, class, and gender as organizing principles. As an engineer, I care about the facilities. Since this is partly autobiographical, I chose the hierarchical neighborhood, village, city perspective that a child faces as his world progressively becomes larger to consider the physical plan. This has an additional attribute of reflecting the hierarchical organization imposed by the planners. Things that are found in the neighborhood—housing, the elementary school, the neighborhood center—are grouped together. Things found at the village center—shopping, recreation, middle and high schools, and religious facilities—are similarly collected. At the city level, workplaces, regional parks, the mall in Columbia, and other larger retail centers are collected.

However, the key to understanding the Columbia plan is not isolating the physical and social components but integrating them, as was originally intended. Organizing principles of Columbia were the clear elucidation of the hierarchy of place emblematic of the physical plan, the integration of incomes and races in the residences and schools, and social experiments to break down barriers. These are examined in turn.

## ► Background

The story of Columbia's founding has appeared in several sources and is summarized here (Breckenfeld 1970; Meyer 1989; Tennenbaum 1996). The Rouse Company accumulated more than fourteen thousand acres, 10 percent of Howard County, Maryland (located between Baltimore and Washington, D.C.), from 140 separate owners, funded by Connecticut General Life Insurance, at an average price of \$1,500 per acre. In October 1963, the acquisition was revealed to the residents of the county, putting to rest rumors about the mysterious purchases (which included the theory that the site was for a laboratory to study diseases and another that the site was intended to become a giant compost heap). At this crucial unveiling, James Rouse described Columbia as a planned new city that would avoid the leapfrog and spot development threatening the county. The new city would be complete with jobs, schools, shopping, medical services, and a range of housing choices. The property taxes from commercial development would cover the additional services with which housing would burden the county. The Columbia planning process included not only planners but also a convening of a panel of nationally recognized experts in the social sciences, known as the Work Group. Meeting for two days, twice a month, for half a year, the Work Group suggested innovations that the planners should try in education, recreation, religion, and health care as well as ways of improving social interactions. Open classrooms, the interfaith centers, and the then-novel idea of a health maintenance organization with a group practice of doctors (the Columbia Medical Plan) sprung from these meetings. The physical plan, with neighborhood and village centers, also was decided on at these meetings. Columbia's "New Town District" zoning ordinance gives the developer great flexibility about what to put where, without getting approval from the county for each specific project.

Columbia was neither the first planned community nor will it be the last. Each place adds its history to the store of ideas influencing the next. Those people and places that influenced Columbia draw from the background of city planning. Tracing backward in time from the 1960s, Columbia was a response to (and evolution of) the Levittowns and other new suburban developments (described in Gans 1967). Its most recent positive influences were the postwar new towns in Sweden, Finland, and England (and to a lesser extent nearby Greenbelt, Maryland). These in turn grew out of the garden city movement fostered by Ebenezer Howard (1965), itself deriving from both utopian ideals as well as more pragmatic rational planners, who sought to improve specific urban systems (Benevolo 1971). Columbia clearly obtained inspiration from both

utopians with its social engineering and pragmatists with its physical plan and execution.

Two local examples of planned communities, Annapolis and Washington, seemed to provide little inspiration to Columbia.<sup>2</sup> Rather, James Rouse aimed in part to emulate the small Eastern Shore town of Easton where he grew up. The orderliness and grandeur of cities like Annapolis and Washington were opposed to the Rouse ideal, leaving Columbia with curvilinear streets and parkways but no great vistas or gateways.

Any discussion of Columbia must include a description of James Rouse and the Rouse Company he founded. The Rouse Company developed Columbia, numerous suburban shopping malls, urban festival marketplaces, and most recently the new town of Summerlin, Nevada (suggesting that new town development can be profitable, thereby satisfying one goal set for the town). In 1989, Rouse himself was worth \$75 million (Meyer 1989), a great contrast to his early years, when he was orphaned and evicted from his home at the age of sixteen. Over the years, he entered the real estate business and built his company to become one of the most influential development firms in the county. After retiring in the early 1980s, Rouse devoted himself to his idealistic or "messianic" side; his last projects were to improve housing for the poor with his Enterprise Foundation. For his various works, he was honored with a cover on *Time* magazine and, in 1995, with a Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Columbia has been called "America's most successful new town" (Meyer 1989) and may be seen as a prototype for the most recent (1970s and beyond) suburbanization and the master-planned communities that now constitute a significant percentage of new residences. These communities, as true of many disciples, have not been completely faithful to the master—but has the master been faithful to itself?

## ► Physical Plan

*Croft farm; Grovers Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; The Solar System; The Universe; The Mind of God.*

—Thornton Wilder  
(1938)

The hierarchy of place and social (and religious) organization perceived in Wilder's *Our Town* (1938) is uncommon, as place is often ambiguous for a child growing up in American suburbia. One subdivision edges into another, and where one belongs is often unclear—when I tell people where I live, do I

associate myself with the name of the local shopping center, high school, unit of government, metropolitan area, or post office? Recoiling against the undifferentiated ubiquitous grid that aids navigation but not identification, Columbia's planners made a conscientious effort to recall the simpler hierarchy of place found in the idealized small town like Grovers Corners or Easton to impose an order on the seeming chaos of the suburbs. In pursuit of this, the new town of Columbia was divided into ten villages and each village into three or four neighborhoods.

## Neighborhood

Adapting Clarence Perry's theory of "The Neighborhood Unit" (1929), each neighborhood (approximately one-half mile in radius) was to be centered on an elementary school, with about five hundred kindergarten through fifth-grade students (the product of three thousand to five thousand inhabitants). This scale attempted to ensure that on the way to school, no child would need to cross a street with heavy traffic (thus using transportation constraints to define appropriate educational scale). Grade-separated tunnels and overpasses were used when this could not be achieved.

Adjacent to the elementary school were small parks and playgrounds, a community center building, a nursery school, a convenience store, and a swimming pool (which architectural covenants restricted from people's backyards). Not every neighborhood wound up with each amenity. The ideal size of a school did not always coincide with the scale of the neighborhood, especially after changes in household structure and shrinking family size from the 1970s onward. Some neighborhoods have a park or field where a site was dedicated for a promised but unbuilt elementary school. The Faulkner Ridge neighborhood even lost its elementary school as changing demographics made it redundant. This lack of adherence to the plan was for obvious reasons upsetting to new home owners and parents, resulting in the removal of signs saying "Future Site of \_\_\_ Elementary School."

To provide focus to the neighborhood, the convenience retail sites in the early neighborhoods were located on collector streets in the middle of the neighborhood rather than on the more trafficked arterial streets on its edge. This lack of pass-by traffic resulted in many of them going out of business.

A recent consultant study, reaching an unreceptive audience in Columbia, suggested that the town needed fewer and larger neighborhood swimming pools, attracting people who drive rather than walk (Stacy 2001b). The population of neighborhoods has declined over time as households have thinned out.

The neighborhoods, with their curvilinear streets, allow locals to claim space and distinguish them from nonresidents who have difficulty intuitively navigating in the absence of a regular street grid. To further enhance the identity for residents at the expense of navigability for visitors, the street-naming convention requires discussion. Neighborhoods were often named for prominent poets and novelists (Bryant Woods, Dickenson) or inspired by their work (Frost giving us Running Brook). The streets in each neighborhood (though not one was called a "street") were named for lines in the works of that author. There is no predicting that one street will follow another (as First Street is followed by Second, or Washington by Adams).<sup>3</sup> The distinct naming of the streets (with names such as *Paul Revere's Ride* in Longfellow or *Proud Foot Place* in Hobbit's Glen) further aided in the identity formation of Columbians, who when giving their address to nonresidents in the Baltimore-Washington corridor would be quickly marked.

At each level of the hierarchy, from subneighborhood to city, there were objects to help focus identity. While common today in newer subdivisions, the planners of Columbia pioneered the use of community mailboxes, even on streets with single-family homes. The stated intent was not to assist the mail carrier but to foster interaction and force neighbors to meet other neighbors randomly at the mailbox. The anomie and isolation found in an automobile-centered suburbia lacking neighborly contact was seen as a major drawback that details like community mailboxes could help overcome.

## Village

Parks buffering bicycle paths would thread through the neighborhood, connecting with other neighborhoods, larger parks, and the village. Each village was to contain a village center, with a supermarket and twenty or so smaller shops, a major recreation center like a tennis club, a middle school for grades 6 through 8, and a high school for grades 9 through 12. However, educational theory, and the desire for a wide course offering, meant that high schools typically served more than one thousand students, fed from two middle schools. This of course meant that not each village would get a high school. In fact, not every village wound up with a middle school.

Symbolically, the first village centers were designed with shops around a common area, centering with a fountain or sculpture. Each village center contained bulletin boards and general-purpose meeting rooms, although later the centers specialized, converting some rooms for dance classes, others for art, and so forth. As not all villages received middle or high schools, or interfaith centers, as proposed in the original plan, some sites originally suggested for other uses went to house



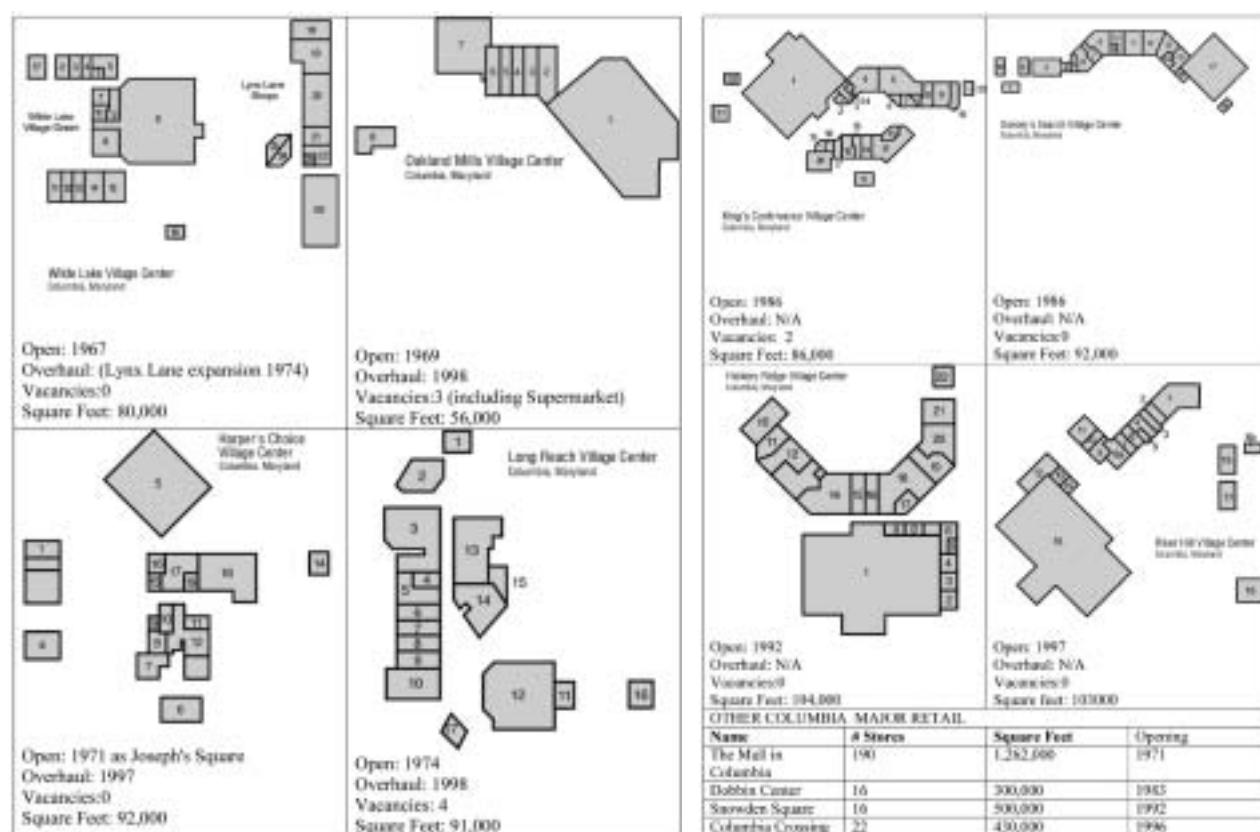
**Figure 1.** Apartments on the roof of Harper's Choice Village Center.  
Source: Photo by author, January 2000.

senior centers, which had been left out of the original plan.<sup>4</sup> The early planners focused on recruiting young families, perhaps forgetting those families aged and had parents. While the village center's community rooms were aimed to serve a function for participatory groups, few "third places" were established where people could just hang out (Oldenberg 1991).<sup>5</sup>

The shopping centers in Columbia's older villages are integrated with the community while turning their back on the local road network. Stores opened onto a "Village Green" in Wilde Lake Village, on "Joseph Square" in Harper's Choice, or occupied the interior of a remodeled barn in Oakland Mills. If you did not already know where the shopping was, you could not necessarily find the stores without the help of signs or maps. The buildings, restricted by architectural covenants, did not use their architecture as advertising as has become common in the suburban landscape of strip centers (Venturi, Izenour, and Brown 1977).

Joseph Square Village Center in Harper's Choice was the site of an experiment to integrate housing and shopping, which is one of the hallmarks of the currently fashionable new urbanism. Apartments were constructed on the second floor of the shopping center. But the units were unpopular and hard to rent, and in the early 1980s the Rouse Company converted many to offices (Figure 1). Perhaps there were not enough units to establish a community or they were poorly designed, but more likely the accessibility to shopping could not overcome the inconvenience of the noise from the shopping center and competition from other available units in garden apartment complexes adjacent to the center.

Although the initial village centers harkened back to the traditional Eastern Shore community, the later ones were informed by strip centers. The newer centers were roughly



**Figure 2.** A comparison of Columbia's shopping centers.

Source: Images and square footage from [www.therousecompany.com](http://www.therousecompany.com). Vacancy data from Stacy (2001a). Opening dates from various sources: [www.columbiamarylnd.com](http://www.columbiamarylnd.com); Erin Texeira, "Stores Stake a Claim in River Hill Village Center," *Baltimore Sun*, 25 June 1997, p. 3b; *Columbia: A Celebration Timeline*. (Hobby 1995)

Note: Excluded is Owen Brown Village Center owned by Giant Food Stores (twelve stores, five vacant, 58,000 square feet, opened 1979, expanded 1987).

parallel to the road, and while there was landscaping, uniform architecture, and a small gathering area, the dictates of modern American marketing overcame the nostalgia of the older design. Still, the locations of most of the village centers were, as their name suggests, central to the villages until the most recent (and last) center, which opened in 1997. River Hill Village Center is located on the periphery of Columbia near the junction of two state roads to attract business from outside the new town.

All of the village centers contain offices, but these typically serve small professional services. Major employment centers are limited to the Columbia Town Center and the peripheral industrial and business parks. The trend toward the opening up of village centers can be seen in Figure 2, showing the plans of all of Rouse's Columbia centers, and Figure 3, contrasting Wilde Lake and River Hill's centers. The older centers are more difficult to rent and of a size that may no longer be appropriate for shoppers or stores.

### Town Center

The original plan placed the Town Center on the west side of Columbia, adjacent to U.S. 29, which bifurcates Columbia. U.S. 29, a major highway connecting Ellicott City (and thus Baltimore) with the District of Columbia has (consistent with the plan) over time been upgraded to a freeway through Columbia.<sup>6</sup> The placement of the major office and shopping complex on U.S. 29 rather than Interstate 95 sacrificed marketability and profit for planning goals. Edge cities, of which Columbia is one, are suburban activity centers that most often crop up at junctions of freeways, ensuring both maximum access and maximum visibility for corporate cathedrals (Garreau 1991). By nestling the Town Center off the less-trodden U.S. 29 and not immediately on the roadway even there, both marketing and access punch seem to have been dissipated.

At the center of town, topped with glass pyramids allowing in natural light and occupying the symbolic location for the



*Figure 3.*

Crystal Palace in Ebenezer Howard's Garden City (1965), sits "The Mall in Columbia." The mall, the city's "main street," opened with two anchoring department stores in 1971. Soon thereafter, one of the anchors (Baltimore's Hochschild Kohn) closed its Columbia store and underwent a reorganization from which it never recovered, as happened to many of the department store chains in Baltimore, Washington, and other cities. In a few years, it was replaced, and in 1981 the mall expanded to add a third anchor and a total of 190 shops. The second original department store, Washington's Woodward and Lothrop, went bankrupt in the 1990s. In 1999, two additional department stores and some more shops were added, and a theatre, some restaurants, and one more store were added; in 2001. The mall had been planned for ultimate expansion to six anchors and 300 stores and seems to be approaching that initial target.

The second key feature of Town Center is the shore of the (man-made) Lake Kittamaqundi. The lakefront is home to the Columbia City Fair, the Exhibit Center,<sup>7</sup> the Rouse Company headquarters, a hotel, restaurants, and offices; it forms



*Figure 4. The People Tree and Columbia Mall clock: two vertical symbols.*

Columbia's best public space and contrasts with the clearly private mall. The People Tree (Figure 4), an abstract sculpture located on the lakefront, where instead of leaves, there are people holding interlocking hands, constitutes the unsubtle symbolism internalized into the belief system of all the early Columbians—who came more as idealists than home seekers. The People Tree, the city's logo, now appears on T-shirts, mugs, and bumper stickers. It contrasts with the traditional clock, which provides a shopping street anchor within the mall, also shown in Figure 4.

Figure 5, an aerial photograph of Town Center, shows the two isolated pedestrian realms and Little Patuxent Parkway and two parking decks that separates them. It also shows the office growth around the mall and the beginnings of a new residential neighborhood being constructed between Governor Warfield, Broken Land, and Little Patuxent parkways in the southeast corner (now complete). The construction was a revision of the initial plan that had designated that area for offices since the conclusion was drawn that the demand for additional office space was not that great.

Despite "big box" retail, one must note the dominance of the shopping mall in America's suburbs; it is shopping malls around which edge cities are built, in contrast to the ports and rail terminals of times past. However, the design of malls has changed over time. The first suburban shopping centers were little more than strips of stores. Eventually, they were turned inward, surrounded by parking lots. By the late 1950s, they were enclosed and then double-decked. This is the model chosen for the Columbia Mall. But evolution did not stop there; the 1980s saw the emergence of a new urban form of shopping mall, enclosed in glass or a remodeled older form (in more than one case, a recycled rail terminal). This new form was introduced by Columbia's Rouse Company at sites such as Boston's Faneuil Hall, Baltimore's Harborplace, and New York's South Street Seaport. Even as they are replicated in city after city, they still retain more visual



*Figure 5. Town Center*

Source: USGS aerial photos, 8 April 1993.

interest than the traditional mall and draw larger crowds. One cannot help but think that if the Columbia Mall came fifteen years later, it too would be a glass-enclosed shopping pavilion adjacent to Lake Kittamaqundi in the Town Center rather than a quarter mile away across a parkway and two parking decks. Since 1967, progress has been made in ideas of urban design toward an integration of the urban core at a pedestrian level. Columbia came a few years too early to see that applied at a suburban level. Consequently, its suburban core, while inviting to the auto, is separated into two unconnected pedestrian realms: the inside of the mall and the promenade along the lakefront.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 6.** Strip shopping comes to Columbia.

Source: Photo by author, January 2000.

### Industrial Parks

Columbia is central to the Baltimore-Washington corridor, abutting Interstate 95 connecting the two cities. Within Columbia, as without, work occurs in a variety of places, schools, offices, shops, and even some limited industrial. The initial plan for Columbia placed offices in the village centers and the town center, with the town center containing the vast majority of sites. Industrial parks were to contain light industry and warehouse space. But with the changes in the economy, they were soon adapted as lower rent office and retail.

Perhaps the most interesting conversion is associated with the General Electric Appliance Park East, which at 1,400 acres occupied 10 percent of Columbia's land area and some prime land at that, immediately adjacent to Interstate 95, with only one traffic light between its entrance and the highway. Furthermore, the property contains the only railroad spur in Columbia. In the early years, major portions of the complex were constructed, although most of the site remained unused. Intended to be the center for all appliance distribution in the eastern United States, business conditions forced GE to withdraw to Louisville, Kentucky, and the plant was shuttered.

A set of changes from the initial plan was the construction of discount centers. The Rouse Company opened Dobbin Center in an area previously set aside for car dealerships adjacent to the industrial parks on the east side of Columbia. This included a Memco, later a Bradlee's, and then a K-Mart, as discount stores changed ownership. However, these centers were soon trumped in the late 1980s and early 1990s by "big box" category killers, larger and more specialized stores. By 1994, land formerly part of the GE Appliance Park East was reused for big box retail, instant construction amidst a sea of parking (Figure 6). Access to this center is clearly intended to be by

automobile; it makes no pretenses toward integration with the community. If you were driving by and did not already know you were in Columbia, you would never guess. While I had heard about the centers, when I first saw them upon revisiting Columbia, my jaw was agape. I was astonished that the Rouse Company would permit a design this ugly. While few architectural masterpieces grace the city, some sense of style and human scale are found in all of the other centers.

### Travel

The hierarchy of roads within Columbia is not as well ordered as the hierarchy of place yet still follows textbook traffic engineering. While there are four main classes of roads, they do not form anything so neat as a grid. The parkways, divided four-lane roads, wind between the villages, connecting Columbia's east and west sides across the great divide of U.S. 29. Each village has a primary arterial of two to four lanes, which connects neighborhoods with the village center and the parkway system. Each neighborhood is served by primary residential streets, connecting the local cul-de-sacs and circles with the elementary school and the primary arterials. While houses front on primary residential streets, they do not have direct access to village arterial streets. Although the street pattern is largely unchanged (and these things change very slowly), some of the neighborhood streets that connect to multiple major streets have been subject to traffic calming, including speed bumps and narrowing of the roadway. Sidewalks have been added to the parkways, which had been designed solely for the car.

The hope for innovation in Columbia's transportation rested with its transit system. Columbia's planners worked to

get funding for an innovative people-mover-type system (Wiegand 1970), which did not come to fruition. The early villages in Columbia were built around a local minibus system originally named (pun intended) "ColumBus." Separate rights-of-way for this system were set aside, passing beside the highest density residential areas, including most townhouses and apartments, connecting them to shopping at the local village center. While only one link, less than a quarter mile in length, of the separate right-of-way was ever paved for service, the bus system continues to this day, no longer funded by Columbia but by Howard County.<sup>9</sup> However, service frequencies of less than one bus per hour along most routes make it undesirable except for the most captive of riders. It certainly does nothing to relieve congestion, of which there is very little within Columbia.

Columbia, nestled in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, has many long-distance commuters. The early 1970s with the rise in energy prices saw the birth of subscription commuter buses to the two downtowns. In the 1980s, commuter rail lines a few miles from east Columbia ran into the center cities, and there has been discussion of using an otherwise seldom-used rail spur into Columbia for a station within the new community. But even with these transit options, fewer than 3 percent of work trips are by transit in Howard County (1990 census).

As with some of the other innovations in Columbia, the ColumBus system failed to adhere to its promise and has been scaled back. Columbia originally sought to provide a place of residence for all of its workers, and there are more than 21 million square feet of office space in the new town. However, individuals still insist on cross-commuting to other suburbs and the main cities of Baltimore and Washington; the average travel time of 27.6 minutes in Howard County (1990 census) is just below average for the metropolitan Washington region. Despite the relative jobs housing balance (about ninety thousand residents to seventy thousand jobs), the long commutes suggest a large number of cross-commuting—inside of 27 minutes a commuter would easily reach the limits of the new town, consistent with the findings of Cervero (1995).

## Parks

A major selling point of Columbia was its integration of parks and recreation into communities from the beginning. More than 5,300 acres of parks (more than one-third of the total area of Columbia), often with pathways for pedestrians and bicyclists, trace all of the creeks and streams through the new town, providing greenways to connect to the man-made lakes and with more significant areas. While this reduced average lot sizes from the typical suburb to maintain the same

average density, gains by providing local access to parklands overcome this. Columbia's governance organization, the Columbia Association, is formally the Columbia Park and Recreation Association; its assessment powers go to maintaining parks and providing events. Unlike parks, there are extra charges to use the neighborhood pools and village recreation facilities. Many residents subscribe to the "Package Plan," which bundles access to the various facilities. Furthermore, almost 150 tot lots grace the city, about 5 per neighborhood. The provision of parks and recreation, well integrated into the community, may be Columbia's greatest success.

The parks system was expanded from the original plan with the preservation of the Middle Patuxent River Valley. However, this was done at great cost in accessibility. Residents of the newest village, River Hill, do not connect directly to Town Center or other villages by parkway; rather, they must leave the new town and travel circuitously along one of the perimeter state highways and back on arterials to reach the rest of Columbia. The trade-off between parks and access is an important one, which the more recent planners weighed differently than the original planners. The pathway system has adopted the abandoned rights-of-way of the minibus system for bikeways, providing more direct links along roads as well as the more scenic park-centered paths.

## ► Social Plan

*The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; the pessimist fears this is true.*

—James Branch Cabell (1926)

Columbia's planners were physical determinists, believing that the physical form of the community would shape the society. In this respect, they were like the urban designers and architects of today. But their agenda was much more ambitious, seeking things much more important than front porches. Their aims included racial and economic integration as America recovered from apartheid, experiments in the basic form of public school education, and radically restructuring the ways religions dealt with space and each other.

## Racial and Economic Integration

Columbia was conceived in the 1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement and the height of optimism about an integrated America. Columbia was also conceived for Howard

County, Maryland, at that time a largely rural county with segregated schools and very segregated residential neighborhoods. Instead of merely mouthing platitudes about the need for desegregation, Columbians lived it, putting their lives, children's education, and property values behind their belief that integration would create a better world. But as pragmatists, the first residents consciously did not move to a commune; homes were still individually owned. My parents are an example of the dichotomy, my father attracted to the innovation of Columbia's plan and my mother accepting it since it was near my sister's school. Neighborhoods were composed of different housing types (though generally these were on different rather than the same streets). The different housing appealed to different income households. An explicit attempt to integrate the races in both housing and in schools was one of Columbia's most important contributions.

Also, each neighborhood had housing in different price ranges, including subsidized housing that attracted a number of inner-city African Americans from Baltimore and Washington. One of the bragging points about how integrated and equitable Columbia was after the 1970 census, when it was revealed that the average African American household income was higher than that of the average white family. Almost as a sign from the heavens, the first child born in Columbia was parented by an interracial couple.

Examining census data (shown in Table 1), the average value of houses owned by African American and white households differed by less than \$4,000. However, white families paid significantly higher rents than African American families (almost \$100/month), which reflects the large number of subsidized housing units in Columbia. While 13 percent of home owners were African American, 26 percent of renters were. As 18 percent of the total population was African American, there is clearly some racial separation in multifamily units. Whether neighborhoods or villages will self-segregate as the result of market processes waits to be seen.

Table 2, rent by village, shows that the older villages (Wilde Lake, Oakland Mills, and Harper's Choice) have below-average rents, due in large part to the concentration of assisted-housing projects in these villages, as well as the higher rents garnered by newer units in general. Some of the higher end and market-rate apartments in these villages have also been converted to condominiums (including the Bryant Gardens apartment complex I lived in for several years). The market-rate apartment complexes often have Section 8 units in them. Clearly, the notion of mixing assisted housing with higher income single-family home neighborhoods has evaporated. While the newest village (River Hill) has no apartment units, there has been considerable market-rate multifamily housing construction in other selected neighborhoods in recent years.

**Table 1.**  
**Racial composition and mixture and housing stock**

Race	Owners		Renters	
	Number of Households	Home Value (\$)	Number of Households	Monthly Rent (\$)
White	13,351	167,050	6,650	686
Black	2,179	163,145	2,498	598
American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut	27	159,907	28	653
Asian or Pacific Islander	616	176,373	332	644
Other race	36	148,056	84	636
Total (average)	16,209	(166,825)	9,592	(661)

Source: 1990 Census STF1A, STF3A tables.

Note: Values in parentheses are averages rather than totals.

**Table 2.**  
**Rent by village**

Village	Range in Rent for Average Apartment	Number of Assisted Housing Projects
Dorsey's Search	737	1,062
Harper's Choice	664	854
Hickory Ridge	902	1,157
King's Contrivance	734	980
Long Reach	755	996
Oakland Mills	625	869
Owen Brown	733	1,038
River Hill	N/A	N/A
Town Center	845	1,390
Wilde Lake	667	865
Total	756	1,004

Source: Columbia Association, Apartments.Net, various. Compiled by author, 2000.

The schools in Columbia, part of the Howard County Public Schools, were integrated from the beginning. Multiculturalism may have begun in Columbia. Integrated elementary schools imposed a curriculum that promoted consideration of historical and literary figures from all races and both genders. As a child of those schools, it is not an exaggeration to say that scientists and doctors like Charles Drew and George Washington Carver were given equal emphasis to a Jonas Salk or Albert Einstein.

This emphasis seems to have dissipated by the high school years. It is unclear whether this was a result of changing times (the 1970s became the 1980s); the fact that, unlike the smaller elementary schools, most of the high schools shared students between liberal Columbia and the much more conservative surrounding Howard County; or simply a different agenda of high school educators compared with their colleagues

teaching younger students. My impression at the time was that African American and white high school students socialize within their race more than between, in contrast with the more integrated elementary ages.<sup>10</sup>

Another indicator of integration is racial composition of school enrollments. When I entered kindergarten at Running Brook Elementary School in 1972, the school was mostly white. My cul-de-sac of eleven houses included two African American families, and there were a noticeable number of nonwhite families in the neighborhood at large. However, examining my class photo, of twenty-four students there was one Asian American and twenty-three white five-year-olds. While this overstates the racial imbalance, it suggests a profound shift compared with the current situation. Profiles of schools within Columbia are given in Table 3. The high schools, which draw from a broad area, all remained majority white, but two of four middle schools had no majority race, as did seven of fifteen elementary schools. Moreover, several elementary schools (including Running Brook and Bryant Woods, which I attended) now have majority African

American populations. I would not argue that there is yet a "white flight," in locational terms. However, the single-family homes in many of the older neighborhoods that once housed young families now are home to empty nesters, while the apartments in those same neighborhoods are home to poorer and younger minority families. Furthermore, open enrollment to allow students to register outside their neighborhood school has redistributed the student population to the extent that the Howard County School Board imposed a moratorium on new open enrollments.

In terms of racial mix, Pointer's Run Elementary in the newest village, River Hill, has a large (23 percent) Asian American student population, indicating some additional self-selection of Asian Americans into neighborhoods without rental housing. (The relatively high Asian American population in Jeffers Hill and Waterloo Elementary Schools is probably due to their location adjacent to the new Kendall Ridge neighborhood in Long

**Table 3.**  
**Racial profile of Columbia schools**

	Year Open	Capacity	Enrollment	White (%)	Black (%)	Asian (%)	Hispanic (%)	Other (%)
<b>High school</b>								
Wilde Lake	1996	1,332	1,466	56.4	33	7.8	2.5	0.3
Oakland Mills	1973	1,057	968	55.6	34.7	6.1	3.5	0.1
Long Reach	1996	1,332	1,422	56.7	27.7	11.3	4.3	0.0
Hammond	1976	1,332	1,261	72.3	20.0	6.0	1.5	0.2
River Hill	1994	1,332	1,572	79.3	7.1	12.5	1.1	0.0
Total		6,385	6,689	64.8	23.6	9.1	2.5	0.0
<b>Middle school</b>								
Oakland Mills	1972	506	482	54.5	35.3	4.8	5.0	0.4
Wilde Lake	1969	596	522	47.9	40.8	7.1	4.0	0.2
Harper's Choice	1973	506	607	53.8	35.9	7.6	2.4	0.3
Owen Brown	1976	584	514	47.9	40.9	7.9	3.3	0.0
Total		2,192	2,125	51.2	38.3	6.9	3.6	0.0
<b>Elementary school</b>								
Atholton	1961	365	496	74.4	15.4	9.0	0.8	0.4
Bryant Woods	1968	311	300	41.1	50.9	6.0	1.3	0.7
Clemens Crossing	1979	478	609	78.3	11.6	9.1	1.1	0.0
Dasher Green	1976	415	411	45.7	46.8	4.6	2.2	0.7
Guilford	1954	390	451	52.8	38.6	6.3	2.5	0.0
Jeffers Hill	1974	421	459	47.9	36.4	10.3	5.4	0.0
Longfellow	1970	396	352	54.2	34.9	6.3	4.2	0.4
Phelp's Luck	1972	496	558	33.8	49.2	6.8	10.0	0.2
Pointer Run	1991	750	893	69.3	6.6	23.0	0.8	0.3
Running Brook	1970	261	252	28.2	48.2	7.2	16.4	0.0
Steven's Forest	1972	333	291	58.2	29.1	6.6	5.7	0.4
Swansfield	1972	484	551	38.4	44.1	8.5	6.8	2.2
Talbott Springs	1973	421	428	29.3	53.1	7.9	9.3	0.4
Thunder Hill	1970	346	371	73.1	16.6	9.3	0.8	0.2
Waterloo	1964	522	543	64.5	21.8	10.1	3.4	0.2
Total		6,389	6,965	54.9	30.9	9.8	4.2	0.2

Source: Howard County Public Schools. **PERMISSION RECEIVED FOR USE?**

Note: All schools include some non-Columbia residents (particularly high schools).

Reach, which lacks its own elementary school). Hispanics tend to be clustering in Phelps Luck Elementary in Long Reach, Talbott Springs in Oakland Mills, and Running Brook in Wilde Lake, all of which have large rental housing concentrations.

This can be further examined through a dissimilarity index, computed for each type of school (elementary, middle, high) separately.

$$D = 0.5 \sum_i \left| \frac{G_i}{G} - \frac{H_i}{H} \right|$$

where

$G_i$  = population of group  $g$  in school  $i$ ,

$H_i$  = population of group  $h$  in school  $i$ ,

$G$  = total population of group  $g$  in all schools, and

$H$  = total population of group  $h$  in all schools.

As can be seen from this dissimilarity index (Table 4), middle schools have racial distributions most like the middle school population at large, while high schools are more dissimilar, and elementary schools are very dissimilar. White and Asian American populations are most similar to each other in the elementary (and high) schools, followed by African American and Hispanic populations. This suggests an emergent racial divide between the white and Asian American populations on one side and the African American and Hispanic populations on the other side. Columbia's attempts at integration, while imperfect, are surely still in the vanguard of suburbia. While the divide may be significantly less than in other communities, it clearly is not in accord with the hopes and plans of Columbia's founders.

### Progressive Schools

Columbia's schools were known not only for their racial integration but also for the open space plan of its schools (Hovet 1996). The typical open space school in Columbia can be visualized as a Panopticon, containing administration and a media center (in previous generations called a library) in the center and "pods" of classrooms, the gym, and cafeteria off on the sides. Each pod of four or so classrooms, serving one or two grades at approximate educational equivalence, would be assigned a name out of a theme. For instance, pods were named for American Indian tribes as at Running Brook Elementary School (Wicomico, Iroquois, Algonquin, and Assateague—which as a first-grader I found difficult to pronounce, much less spell). Open classrooms were intended to provide flexibility, team teaching within pods, and a certain amount of creativity. What they did result in was noise, students having to walk through one classroom to reach another, and other distractions. Were they built for sound educational reasons? Or, as is more cynically asserted, were they built to save money on walls and halls? In either case, expensive retrofits have been undertaken in recent years. This has gone so far as the demolition of Columbia's first high school (in Wilde Lake) at the young age of twenty-five and its reconstruction in a more traditional vein (Figure 7).

The proponents of the education system within Columbia, part of the larger Howard County Public Schools, would point to high college acceptance rates,<sup>11</sup> scores on standardized tests, and finalists in the Westinghouse (later Intel) talent search to suggest that the schools have done a good job. But the schools can only do as well as the talent provided by residents, who themselves moved to Howard County, and Columbia in particular, with advanced degrees and a pragmatic utopianism that leads them to take a role in their children's lives.

**Table 4.**  
**Dissimilarity index in Columbia schools**

Dissimilarity Index	High School	Middle School	Elementary School
White/black	0.27	0.06	0.37
White/Asian	0.12	0.08	0.19
Black/Asian	0.27	0.06	0.40
White/Hispanic	0.28	0.12	0.48
Black/Hispanic	0.15	0.12	0.22
Asian/Hispanic	0.23	0.18	0.46
Total/white	0.07	0.03	0.13
Total/black	0.19	0.03	0.24
Total/Asian	0.14	0.07	0.18
Total/Hispanic	0.21	0.12	0.37

Source: Calculated by author.

The self-selection of residents in the area who care about education may more than compensate for adherence to "theories" or educational fads such as open-space classrooms. The high educational level of the parents is suggested by Howard County's largest employer, located just south of Columbia, the Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory (Connell 1994).

The schools, and more particularly the students, in Columbia's early years would have been envied by most places, but this is not because of the social theories implemented in the early years. The retreat to more conventional school buildings provides evidence that those who worked in the experiment of open schools have decided the costs outweigh the benefits or that the younger generation is more pragmatic than utopian. While open enrollment has been permitted to some extent, other education experiments that break the neighborhood school concept—as suggested by Webber's (1970) notion of "community without propinquity," like widespread use of magnet or charter schools, or vouchers—have not been undertaken. Perry's (1929) neighborhood school concept, fixing in place schools optimal according to the pedagogy, planning theories, economics, and road design standards of 1929, warrants reconsideration.

### Interfaith Worship

Integration and interaction were perhaps the greatest themes of Columbia's plan. This applied not only to race but also to religion. Churches were not permitted to sprout in any residential neighborhood, as is common through suburbia; rather, at each village center an "interfaith center," with little exterior symbolism, would be placed. Like the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which is used by Armenians, Copts, Greeks, Syrians, and Roman Christians as well as Moslems, the interfaith



*Figure 7. New Wilde Lake High School.*

center served multiple denominations, among them Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, inside a single building. Not only was this intended to promote religious integration, it was thought to be cost-effective as well. The sharing of buildings between churches and parking with the local shopping center and schools should save capital expenses for religious organizations. For congregations not large enough to warrant space in the interfaith center or wealthy enough to afford their own buildings, community halls and the public schools have made space available for meetings.

For religions not hung up on physical spaces, this universal architecture suggests a universalist religion. However, the toned-down religious approach found in Columbia's interfaith centers did not permit orthodox or fundamentalist faiths to stake their own space (aside from a sacred closet) or establish distinct edifices. Furthermore, this worked against the establishment of neighborhood religious concentrations (important in orthodox communities). Most fundamentalists and orthodox found a way to separate themselves from this homogenized religion and establish their own spaces and identity. The interfaith ideal imposes a specific set of religious tolerances that accord with certain faiths and violate others (it takes a certain value system to not be upset when your church is shared with heretics and blasphemers). While Maryland has had religious toleration (for Christians) since 1649, Columbia insisted that the different sects not only tolerate each other outside church but also share space together (Wiggins 1973).

There has been some self-selection among the religions concerning which groups meet in which center. A number of religions, after growing within the interfaith centers or after using public schools as meeting rooms, have sought sites on the periphery of Columbia, outside its jurisdiction, for their own building and parking lot to establish unique, individual religious spaces. In 1994, there were more than 170 places of worship in Howard County, only a handful of which use the interfaith centers (Connell, 1994). The newer interfaith

centers (Owen Brown, Long Reach) are more akin to attached churches, with separate entrances but shared parking, rather than the original ideal of the first two interfaith centers (Wilde Lake, Oakland Mills) with their shared meeting halls, podiums, and baptismal fountains.

However, there is clearly some interfaith spirit within Columbia. Although it would be difficult to characterize the population as religious, much less God-fearing, there are dozens of congregations. The religious leaders are important within the community; one rabbi has been suggested as a candidate for mayor should Columbia become a municipality, Maryland's second largest city.<sup>12</sup> Interfaith Housing (now Columbia Housing Corporation), a nonprofit organization organized by several religious groups, ran the first subsidized housing within Columbia, presently numbering three hundred units.

There are no religious private schools in the city itself, although some of its residents find a way to attend, riding buses to schools in nearby communities. Sunday and Hebrew schools do make use of the interfaith facilities.

## ► Conclusions

The Columbia plan has preserved the hierarchy of city, village, and neighborhood. However, the later villages have neighborhoods that feel somewhat less distinct than the earlier ones. The only way you know you are in a different neighborhood is the sign at the entry. The entry may not even be a new street, just a point of continuation along the main village arterial. While the new Columbians may not identify as much with the city as the pioneers, I believe Columbians still have a stronger identity of place than found in a typical suburb.

Although places were organized hierarchically, in each place there was a strong attempt made to mix people, functions, and activities. The neighborhood and village center

each had multiple buildings in a concentration, the school and pool at the neighborhood center and the shops, sports, (religious) sects, and schools at the village center. Uses outside those centers were kept separate: housing in the neighborhoods, offices and the mall in downtown, and light industry in the industrial parks. However, within some of those uses, an effort at diversity was made.

In retail, where failed experiments hurt the pocketbook of the Rouse Company, the inward-looking village centers were turned outward in new construction. Ironically, this is even being celebrated as progress by Rouse Company officials. The evolution of retail toward an even more auto-dominated model has been incorporated into Columbia, despite the potential damage to small business that would ensue. The ideals of the Columbia plan have been most lost in terms of the structure of shopping, and it is here that Columbia has retreated most.

Columbia's rigid hierarchy of town, village, neighborhood ensures that a particular set of economies of scale, based on technologies, standards, and behaviors circa 1967, are burned permanently into the community's fabric. As pedagogical theory adapts, or household structure changes and the population ages, the neighborhood elementary school is no longer the right size. As people's preferences for recreation evolve, the neighborhood pool is no longer optimal, though perhaps still important. As economies of scale in retailing and distribution and people's desires about how to spend time shopping change, the village scale becomes obsolete. Other, more traditional urban forms (e.g., the grid) may be more flexible in responding to changing needs than the hierarchy of roads and places that define Columbia.

Placement of neighborhood schools and pools, village center shops, and the town center itself in the interior of their respective communities rather than their edge added to the separation of residents from nonresidents, divorcing the insider from the outsider, creating identity at the expense of profits.

Given the decline of industrial uses and the opportunities present with modern highway-based suburban activity centers, if the planners had it to do again they might have placed town center off center. Thus, Columbia the Garden City would have been more semicircular than round. Still, the Rouse Company's continued development of the Town Center as the main office center, even if somewhat dissipated by the creation of new office parks, shows an adherence to the plan or some very long-term strategic thinking.

The ideas of Clarence Perry are making a comeback in the new urbanism movement, as a pedestrian-oriented realm, safe for children to walk in without fear of heavy traffic, is promoted. While the street pattern of Columbia is more akin to

the curvilinear streets of Olmstead or postwar suburbs than the grid or its variants, the removal of through traffic from neighborhoods is largely, though not entirely, successful.

While Perry is said to support the "cellular city" created by the car and surrounded by streets (Darton 2000), the new urbanists are in favor of cells centered on transit stations. In either case, the scales are very similar. The intentions of its creators are not, however.

Columbia, although far from perfect, contrasts with the failure of imagination of the best hope of today's planners, the new urbanist enclaves of exclusivity. While claiming to promote community, the new urbanists' adoption of isolating elements such as alleys and individual mailboxes enables the static structures to shine as if people were living in museum, reflecting a false nostalgia of historically anachronistic architecture. While Columbia has strict architectural covenants, it has not crippled its buildings' ability to learn (Brand 1994). The Columbia plan may hearken in places to small-town life, but it does not impose the architecture of previous periods, designed for different technologies and bound by different economics, on today's residents. Traveling through Columbia's neighborhoods gives a distinctly contemporary 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s feel, truer than trying to impose a classic edifice.

The pragmatic utopianism of Columbia was a marriage of great society ideals, the hopes for social engineering, the memories of small-town life, with the traditional capitalism of the American real estate industry. It would not have been possible without a great visionary, James Rouse, or its early residents, who self-selected to be pioneers in placing social values above economic ones and the pragmatic home buyers wanting a well-designed, well-placed suburban home.

## ► Notes

1. A "new town" is considered to be a self-contained, self-sufficient city unit consisting of a range of housing, workplaces, industry, shopping areas, schools, parks, and so forth. While it is self-contained, it does not require all residents to work within the town, just that they could. Typically, a single owner or developer controls planning, construction, and marketing and stages development over time (Owen 2001).

2. And one might note that one of Maryland's latest planned new communities, the new urbanist Kentlands, has rejected the urban form of Columbia, seeking a more formal structure.

3. The street-naming convention did, however, help astute map readers become more familiar with literature.

4. The elderly were a modest surprise, as true of many utopian communities, regardless of how pragmatic. But the high-rise apartments, and later senior center, adult day care, and senior-oriented buildings, have accommodated this population. Eventually, a funeral home and memorial gardens were opened in the city. Simi-

lar to utopian communities, the elderly and dead were not part of the original plan, but the pragmatist makes room for the march of time. The disabled are another issue. The distances in Columbia are sufficiently suburban that walking to shops for the physically disabled could be a struggle. As everywhere, curb cuts had to be retrofitted into sidewalks, which are still on the narrow side. Walk/don't walk signs at pedestrian crossings still do not provide auditory clues. The public schools were unable to accommodate the severely disabled in the early years, so they were often sent away to private schools at public expense.

5. Home, work, and school are obviously important places in the lives of individuals, but there is also importance to "third" places where consumption, conviviality, worship, and play take place (Oldenberg 1991). Ray Oldenberg (1991) speaks longingly for the neighborhood bar or café, a third place where people can go on their way between work (or school) and home to be with their buddies and imbibe alcohol or caffeine. These neutral neighborhood sites were largely ignored by the Columbia plan, which permitted no neighborhood establishments in order to protect residents from the noise of rowdy customers and their autos and other negative externalities. A few third places have been established. Mrs. Z's, best described as a hippie café, was located in Swansfield neighborhood in Harper's Choice, one of the few neighborhood centers located on a more important road; however, it fell victim to fire. In the mid 1970s, J.K.'s Pub was opened on the Lynx Lane portion of the Wilde Lake Village Centers, which recently closed. A follow up, The Last Chance Saloon, opened in Oakland Mills in a location that had seen nearly a dozen failed restaurant attempts in fewer than a dozen years. Hobbit's Glen Golf Course has a clubhouse bar, and there are some restaurants and discotheques that functioned as third places. However, all of these places require driving for the vast majority of regular customers. Wilde Lake High School students in recent years have operated the Wilde Times Café at the local Village Green, a third place for adolescents. It was closed down by the Rouse Company, which owns the shopping center, after several police calls involving disturbances of more than one hundred students, and it presently operates two days a week. Ironically, the café was one of the reasons the county won an "All-American City" award.

6. U.S. 29, originally Columbia Pike, named for the District of Columbia, indirectly gave its name to Columbia.

7. The Frank Gehry-designed Exhibit Center, which welcomed potential home buyers as well as young future planners in search of maps and visions, has been converted to restaurant and office use and is slated by the Rouse Company for demolition, despite some local protest (Vozzella 2001).

8. One might note that Reston, Virginia, planned at the same time as Columbia, did build the Lake Anne Village Center along the waterfront, a shopping center that has had its ups and downs. A new urbanist main street was constructed away from the lake in the mid-1990s there.

9. Howard County is now the sixth most affluent county in the United States in terms of households earning greater than \$75,000 per year (Rouse Company 2001) and so can afford to subsidize buses but has little demand for them.

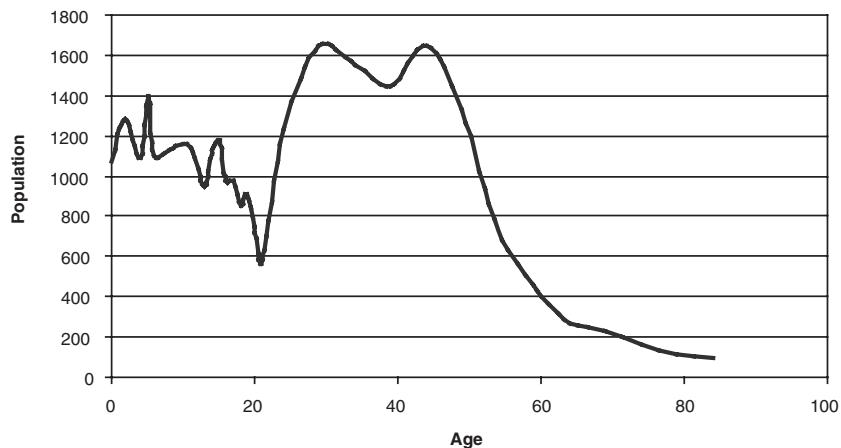


Figure 8. Columbia's age distribution.

Source: 1990 census data.

10. Unlike reports in Burkhart (1981), from the early 1970s, I saw no racial incidents in high school in the early 1980s. The violence in high school did of course exist; it was not based on race but more on class, clique, and bullying. I can recall being attacked for my ethnicity only once in middle school. There was an unusual class-based incident in middle school, however. A girl of upper-middle-class background asked one of lesser means, "Do you think you're pretty?" which set in course events requiring more than a dozen police officers to ensure that no violence took place as the upper-middle-class clique of girls walked home from school under threat of stoning from the lower-class girls and their friends in the adjacent high school.

11. Columbia has yet to attract a primary campus for a school of higher learning beyond the local community college. A number of local universities (Johns Hopkins, Towson, Loyola) have established continuing education extensions in Columbia, but these remain satellites with no campus community feel. The original site of the Johns Hopkins extension was at Joseph Square in the Village of Harper's Choice. But this was an isolated building that was later torn down when the village center was remodeled. Early on, a campus of Dag Hammarskjöld College (affiliated with the United Nations) was placed in Columbia, in a retrofitted mansion, although this closed. Similarly, a branch of Antioch College also left the same site. Like myself, most college-bound students leave the new town, creating a sharp dip in the age profile, which thus loses people at that critical age (Figure 8).

12. Municipalization of Columbia has been rejected twice, in 1979 and 1995 (Johnson 1979; Sachs 1994).

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