Can these thinkers help put across a vast new town?
Can these thinkers help put across a vast new town?

Developer James W. Rouse (top, center) thinks they can. That's why he's called on the professionals pictured here, plus others from such remote fields as education, medicine and communication, to help his planners design Columbia, Md., a huge new town for 150,000 people midway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C.

Rouse believes that little is known about the social problems posed by new towns. Do buyers really benefit from neighborhoods that are racially or economically mixed? Is there a way to relieve women residents of the isolation and frustration they often feel in suburban homes? Is there a way to design a large town so that the individual resident feels an identity with it?

Rouse did not expect the social scientists and other consultants to give him solid answers to questions like these; he simply wanted what he calls "shafts of light" to influence the planners of Columbia.

His consultants, brought together in an informal work group, were also to act as judges of Rouse's contention that, somehow, a way can be found to lift community life to a new level of dignity and inspiration.

For a discussion of the work group's views, turn the page.
Step 1: Work group explores social needs seldom considered by planners

Jim Rouse wants Columbia to be "a garden where people grow," and the consulting work group's job was, so to speak, to help him provide the right soil. The group, which met for over 200 hours, came up with two requirements:

1. The town must have a land plan that is oriented toward people instead of buildings. Explains Psychologist Donald N. Michael of the Institute of Policy Studies, Washington, D.C.: "A good physical plan can actually encourage social activities and encourage individual growth."

2. The town must have enough schools, churches, libraries and playgrounds to meet residents' cultural and recreational needs.

To reach these goals, the work group established three fundamentals of new-town planning:

* A new town can provide the best community facilities without putting a heavy financial burden on its residents or the developer.

* Every school can have an elaborate gymnasium, a lunch room and an auditorium, not just a multi-purpose room that functions inadequately as all three. Churches can be spared their competitive investment in meeting rooms and parish halls. And valuable land need not be squandered on parking lots at shopping centers.

* The key to these savings is understanding the inherent relationships between seemingly unrelated parts of a community.

Shopping centers and office buildings, too often separated in the suburbs, can be grouped around a shared parking lot. If the shopping center and the office buildings are properly placed they will attract people to a central area where restaurants and amusement parks will flourish. High-density housing, instead of acting as a buffer between houses and stores, can be built along a main artery, where it will support a transit system that can free the community from its dependence on automobiles.

By placing junior and senior high schools near each other, the developer makes it possible for both schools to share a lavish auditorium, library and gymnasium that might not be economically feasible for just one school. Another advantage: once the educational complex is centered in a residential area, its facilities become available for extensive adult education (an idea inspired by pro-
grams in New Haven, Conn., and Flint, Mich.). Churches, if grouped near the complex, can also share the buildings. And if a medical building is added to the complex, it makes possible an inter-relation between the community (particularly its schools) and its medical experts.

Says Education Consultant Christopher S. Jencks of the Institute of Policy Studies: "No one has gone as far as this with the principle of shared facilities."

The result of this planning can be a new sense of freedom in the community.

Residents who live within walking distance of stores, schools and playgrounds—or within a ten-minute bus ride of a shopping center—regain a freedom they lost when they left the city. And they acquire a freedom for expression usually available only in small communities, where the nearness of recreation areas and meeting rooms gives everyone an opportunity for participation—and leadership. In Columbia, says Wallace Hamilton, project historian, "Nobody need feel like a nobody."

Out of these free-wheeling sessions came a raft of ideas for new-town developers

The work group felt that a developer can make valuable contributions to his new town—both in the way he plans it and through the institutions he helps establish. Specifically:

The developer can teach a new town how to grow. The key to this idea is an institute of human development. This agency—acting as a sort of planning department for people—would study changing social needs and try to fuse the community's resources (its facilities, talent and money) into new social programs. In the field of health, for example, the institute could evaluate the community's public health service, its doctors, its hospital and foster continuity among all three. And the institute could begin early to collect data that reveal the state of the community's health.

The developer can teach a new town to talk. He should not desert the town when it begins to grow, but should give it the means to communicate with itself. Says Work Group Participant Stephen B. Withey of the University of Michigan Institute of Social Research: "Communication in a growing community is like a nervous system. Patterns must be learned, associations must be established and memories must be built." Withey proposes a centralized information center, early creation of a town newspaper, an annual community report, closed-circuit television and a rumor checking service. The last of these would ferret out misinformation (after the manner of the federal government in World War II) and use the local press to set the record straight. Withey would also encourage an occasional Mardi Gras to let the residents "blow off steam."

But the town must also respect individuals' privacy. Says Historian Hamilton: "We don't want a place where someone rings your doorbell on Saturday morning and announces, 'Everybody out for shuffleboard.'"

The developer can help the new town establish a good image. A new town is a setting for many subdivisions. The kind of housing built in early subdivisions will set the tone for subsequent projects, so great care is necessary in selecting the first houses built. And the developer must also be prudent in his promotion lest he give potential buyers a distorted picture of the town.

But, says Group Member Robert Gladstone, an economic consultant: "There's a lot of opposition in this country to the company town or the community that smacks of too much planning."

He points out there may be some value in merchandising a new town piecemeal and letting each subdivision create its own image.

The developer must give a new town the means of supporting itself. A new town destined to grow from 8,000 people (the present population in the Columbia area) to 150,000 in 15 years will put a huge financial burden on its county. Work Group Participant Henry Bain, a private consultant in government, proposes a "fiscal fence" around Columbia to shield the rest of the county from the burden of facilities which would be used mainly by Columbia residents. To do this, he would turn Columbia into a community improvement district with power to float bonds and finance and administer its own improvements, leaving responsibility for police protection, education and certain other functions with the county. This proposal, which would require legislative approval in Maryland, is based on a principle (the Estero municipal-improvement district) used by Foster City, a new town in California. Columbia residents who do not wish to use all the town facilities also should be protected, says Bain, who suggests special user charges for people who do use the facilities.

continued
Step 2: schematic layout scales a huge new town to social needs

This theoretical plan—produced by Developer Rouse's work group of consultants and planners—takes a town of 150,000 people and breaks it up into manageable units. Here's how it works:

The town itself is divided into ten (mile-wide) villages.

Each village is divided into five neighborhoods.

Town, village and neighborhood each have their own centers (see drawings at right).

Permanent open space is interposed between the town center and the villages—and between the villages themselves.

A bus-route—closed to automobiles—connects eight of the village centers with the town center.

A belt of industry is separated from the residential areas.

This community-planning scheme goes a long way toward fostering better education, better government and better transportation within the town.

It improves education by adopting the town plan to school requirements. Each neighborhood has an elementary school located so that all young children can easily walk to school over unobstructed paths. Each village contains a junior and senior high school no more than a half mile from any house in the village. And the town center itself has a college or university, which becomes the cultural heart of the community.

The work group's scheme promotes better government by encouraging residents to participate in local administration. Consultant Wayne Thompson, Oakland, Calif., city manager, points out that clear village boundaries may even stimulate the residents to form their own associations to handle such housekeeping functions of government as street maintenance and garbage collection. Says Thompson: "We have to turn loose the resources of the public sector for more urgent problems."

The scheme simplifies transportation by providing convenient bus stops in the town and village centers. A local bus can circle the villages in 40 minutes, and it connects with an intercity bus at the town center. For residents who still wish to rely on their cars, two villages (with predominantly low-density housing) are located outside the bus route.
The key to the scheme: a center for each level of community life—town, village and neighborhood

Ideally, each center must meet these requirements:

- It must be so well located that it is surrounded by just the right number of residents to support its services.
- It must be so well sized that it is rarely overcrowded.
- It must contain the proper mix of facilities to satisfy the residents it is designed to serve.
- It must be so well planned that its facilities don't conflict with each other. For example, an elementary school cannot be placed next to a garage.

The town center should contain the one-of-a-kind resources that must be accessible to a large population.

It should have a hospital, department store, restaurant, hotel, theatre and perhaps even an amusement park. In addition, the town's administration should be concentrated here, along with office buildings and high-rise apartments. The town center—with its square—should also provide a common meeting ground for all residents.

The village centers should serve a collection of neighborhoods clustered in villages a mile in diameter.

Here will be much of the town's active life, with a center for weekly shopping, teen-age activity and recreation. To keep the recreation facilities in each village in tune with over-all town needs, Work Group Participant Robert Crawford, Philadelphia recreation commissioner, proposed a single corporation to operate all facilities from playgrounds to bowling alleys.

The village center can also offer opportunity to promote religious life. With that thought in mind, the National Council of Churches has studied Columbia's plan and is now considering such innovations as 1) a townwide cooperative ministry, which would provide central administration for church planning, construction, training and community development; 2) an extensive shared-time education program which would make use of public school facilities; 3) an ecumenical institute to promote adult religious education; 4) a national conference center; and 5) a nonprofit religious-facilities corporation to build, own and manage churches in the new town.

Neighborhood centers must offer a point of orientation for families and young children.

They should contain a nursery and a tot lot for infants, a kindergarten and playground for pre-school children, a school and play field for children in the first four grades and a general store which would answer a minimum of shopping needs. The store would also serve as administrative nucleus for the neighborhood and its recreation facilities. The store manager should receive special training for his role. His duties would include maintaining a neighborhood bulletin board, keeping an eye on recreation facilities and issuing sports equipment.

Though the neighborhood is the smallest geographic entity in the scheme, Participant Herbert J. Gans, who conducted sociological research in Park Forest and Levittown, N.J. proposes an even smaller unit—the block. Says he: "This is the major social arena, the major source of friends for many people. Block homogeneity is necessary. Putting well educated with poorly educated, working class with upper-middle class creates conflict. One cannot segregate by education or by child rearing values. So price—which reflects income—is the developer's only form of leverage."
Step 3: final plan fits a new social framework to the land

Fortunately, the site of Columbia, Developer Rouse's new town, lends itself well to the planning theory evolved by Rouse's work group (see p. 86). The site offers these advantages:

1. It divides easily into villages and neighborhoods.

   Much of the terrain is rolling. There are rivers that can be dammed into lakes. And high ground near the middle of the huge tract (18,000 acres) makes a good location for the town center.

2. It is roughly one contiguous parcel.

   To assemble it required 140 separate transactions at an average cost of $1,500 an acre. Community Research & Development—the company headed by Rouse—was backed in this purchase by Connecticut General Life Insurance Co., which contributed $23 million to the venture. Some 4,000 acres within the town are not part of it. One pasture will become CRD property only after a horse dies; other land, including a 300-house subdivision and an orchard, is not for sale. But the town plan is large enough to absorb these thinly scattered tracts without disrupting the scheme of villages and neighborhoods.

3. It is well situated to attract residents.

   Columbia's site is connected to Baltimore and Washington by major highways and a proposed interstate road. And the site lies in an industrial corridor that itself is a source of new residents because of its attraction for new plants. The town must draw 1,500 new buyers and renters every year to survive—and 2,500 to flourish.

   Like most new towns, Columbia will accelerate the development of its rural surroundings, a process that often generates local resentment. Some Howard County residents are exurbanites who settled there after World War II, hoping to outdistance Baltimore's urban sprawl, so they could be expected to oppose the rezoning CRD needs to carry out its plan. But Rouse and his staff have mitigated their fears of urbanization by tirelessly explaining the village concept. Says Mrs. Philip Thompson, publisher of the Ellicott City (Md.) Times: "To me, it's comforting to see this town developed by men who are concerned with people and what can be done with the land—and not just with profits."
Columbia will make it easier for builders to develop, design, build and sell

Says Developer Rouse: "Builders in Columbia won't have to worry about getting zoning, roads, sewers and the other facilities they need. It will be done for them. Instead of spending all their time at city hall, they will be free to devote their energy to the actual job of building." And Columbia will also help builders with a townwide merchandising and publicity program. As a result, says Rouse, "we'll probably attract the more craft-oriented builders."

Columbia will offer its builders these other advantages:

*The town will permit design that is more practical than aesthetic.*

Builders who locate in Columbia will have to conform to design standards when they build, but architecture will not be an over-riding consideration. Says Rouse: "I don't think we're going to create anything new in design in Columbia." This prophecy reflects Rouse's attitude toward architecture in general: "There has been too much emphasis on the role of the architect as an artist—and not enough on his role as a social servant." Significantly, architects were not represented on the planning work group.

Inevitably, economics will be a prime consideration in determining design, a fact which doesn't dismay Rouse in the least. Says he: "Too often we prejudge what is good in design. I'm a great believer in what the marketplace has to say. And I have a genuine respect for the guy who understands the marketplace—the builder."

Up to now the planning of Columbia has not been cramped by a tight budget. Says Rouse: "We haven't had to make many compromises. But eventually, feasibility will restrict what we can put into this town." One significant work-group proposal has already been dropped: a half-mile-wide green belt surrounding Columbia. This was discarded when some 3,469 acres of permanent open space were apportioned within the town. Says Rouse: "We just couldn't afford another 3,000 acres for a green belt."

*Columbia will offer builders a variety of markets.*

Builders who buy land there will find land planned for a wide choice of housing:

- Low-density housing (on plots ranging from an acre to ten acres) will cover 1,420 acres.
- Medium-density housing (on quarter-acre and half-acre plots) will cover 4,099 acres.
- High-density housing (garden apartments, townhouses and high-rise buildings) will cover 1,220 acres.

Most of this housing will be built by independent builders, though Community Research & Development will probably take on the high-rise and commercial construction.

*Columbia's builders can promise their buyers one of the largest shopping centers in the world.*

This center will eventually include more than 1 million sq. ft. of space. It will consume much of the 345 acres allocated to commercial properties, though stores are also planned for every neighborhood and village. The center, to be built in stages matching the pace of demand, will feature a covered mall and convenient transportation to and from the villages. When completed, the center will reverse a trend of two decades: it will be the first regional shopping center that contributes to the core of a city instead of competing with it.

Some 1,674 acres are set aside for industry. This property is expected to generate 8,000 primary jobs in Columbia. Community services will create about 22,000 secondary jobs.

—ROBERT L. SIEGEL
December 16, 1964

Mr. Richard W. O'Neill, Editor
House & Home
330 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036

Dear Mr. O'Neill:

We are deeply grateful to you for the thoughtful and perceptive piece on Columbia by Bob Siegel. It was a splendid piece of reporting. Bob worked diligently to get at the real source material and to the individual members of the work group for his facts and opinions. We are indebted to House & Home and to Bob Siegel for your thorough, responsible analysis of what we are attempting to do.

Best regards and many thanks.

Sincerely,

James W. Rouse

cc

bo

Gdf