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hen Andy Stack moved to Columbia, Md., in 1977, the planned community was a decade old and tens of thousands of residents strong. He thought it was a great place to live and work. Shops and walking trails were nearby, new schools were popping up, and there was racial and economic diversity. It was convenient to Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C., and there was green space everywhere.

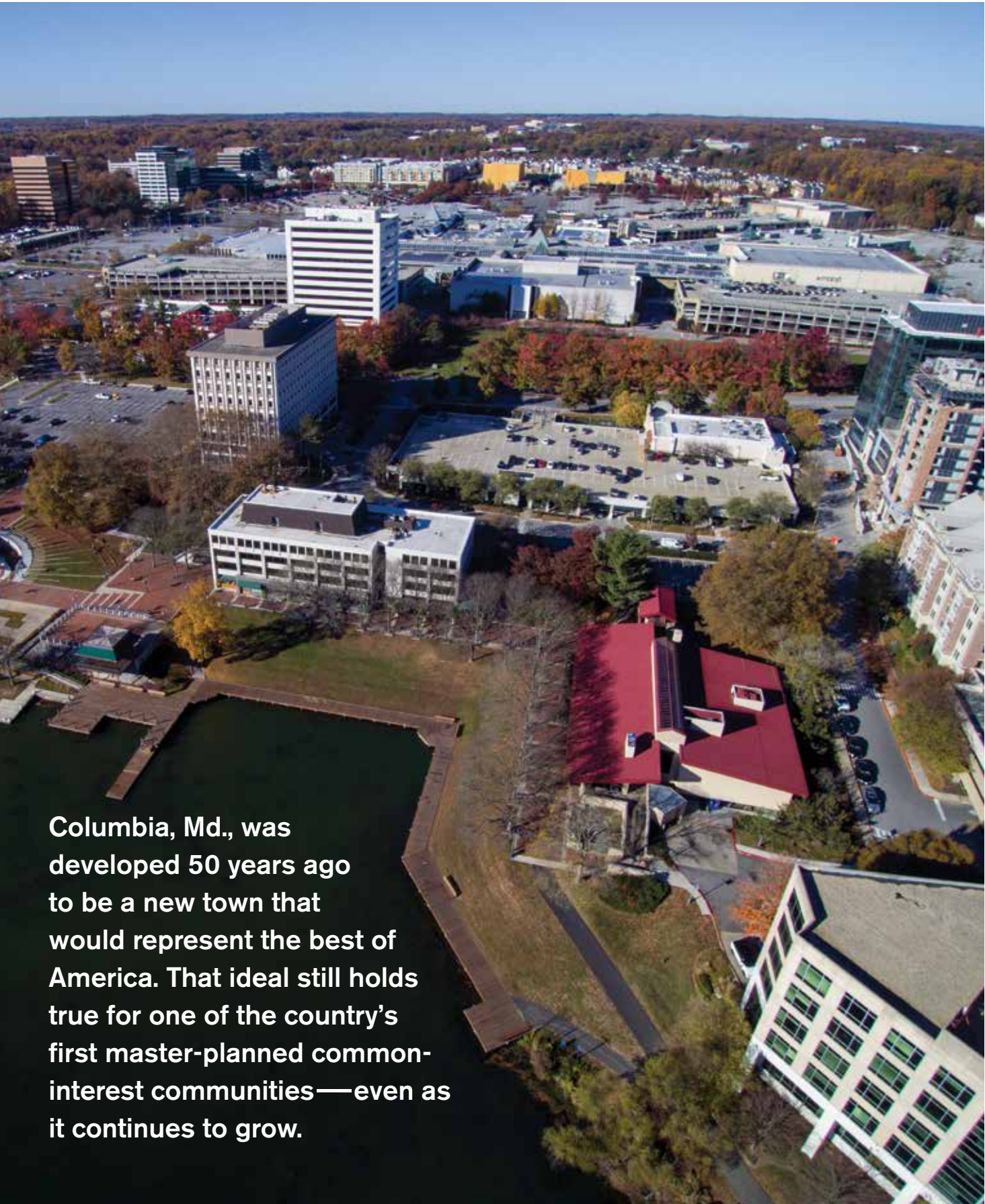
Flash forward to the present as Columbia celebrates its 50th birthday this year. The population now exceeds 100,000. Construction is under way on Downtown Columbia, a mixed-use development that eventually could encompass 5,500 residential units, 1 million square feet of retail space, 5 million square feet of offices, 640 hotel rooms, and a conference center.

BY STEVE BATES

PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT MERHAUT



Good AS Good



Columbia, Md., was developed 50 years ago to be a new town that would represent the best of America. That ideal still holds true for one of the country's first master-planned common-interest communities—even as it continues to grow.



YET TO STACK, Columbia is still a great place. For all of the development and the social, political, and economic changes that have occurred in half a century, the character of his community is still largely the same.

The 10 villages that make up the town have seen grocery stores and other businesses come and go. Traffic has increased with the influx of merchants and residents. But the vision that guided founder James Rouse remains alive and well: Columbia is a diverse community that avoids many of the drawbacks of suburban sprawl by virtue of wise planning and careful stewardship.

Stack came to Columbia because he had landed a job at nearby Fort Meade. “What kept me here is that I just love the community,” says Stack, who represents the Owen Brown village on the board of Columbia Association, the nonprofit community services organization that oversees the town. “People who live here want to live here, and they want to participate in the community. The kids grow up, and they come back.”

Stack isn't alone in thinking that Columbia has accomplished something. In 2016, *Money* magazine ranked it as the best small U.S. city to live. “Columbia, Md., turns 50 next year, and it's never looked better,” says the article.

What makes Columbia special? In part, it's the open space that was set aside during Columbia's planning in the 1960s—a whopping 3,600 acres of it. Residents can stroll on 94 miles of pathways. They can enjoy three lakes, 23 outdoor pools, and 40 ponds. They can drive along residential streets and larger roads surrounded by exuberant foliage.

“People who visit, they look at me, and the first thing they say is, ‘Where's the city?’ Because it's so green,” says Stack. “It doesn't look like your typical city. I've always liked that about Columbia.”

While Columbia isn't technically a city, if it was, it would be the second largest in Maryland after Baltimore. The Howard County government provides police and fire services and operates the public schools in the community. Columbia Association's Board of Directors, which oversees an annual budget of more than \$76 million, manages common facilities and services and takes the lead in strategic and operational planning. Each of the 10 villages has its own homeowners association that enforces covenants, manages buildings and neighborhood centers, and hosts classes and events.

“Sometimes, I think people can lose sight of the fact that we aren't a governmental entity. We're a community services organization,” says Columbia Association President and CEO Milton Matthews.

Columbia residents are a very active bunch. Given the chance to discuss important issues, the community could meet around the clock.

“There were times when we would spend four hours in conversation, and we would get to the end of the evening and ask, ‘What have we accomplished?’” says Matthews.

Columbia's governance structure was modified in April 2016 to create three standing committees—audit, risk management, and board operations—to help run it more effectively.

CREATING A TOWN

Columbia started as an idea in the early 1960s when Rouse and other planners brainstormed how to create a new town that would represent the best of America. At the time, several similar experiments were in the works in places such as Reston, Va., Irvine, Calif., and Woodlands, Texas.

Rouse wanted to build a complete city, with a solid economic base and a variety of housing styles and prices in each village so that people of all income levels and backgrounds could live wherever they chose. In addition, Rouse endeavored to preserve and respect the land. And he intended to provide for the growth of Columbia's people, to inspire them by fostering the arts and educational opportunities.

Until the early 1980s, Rouse's development firm controlled the Columbia Association board, as is common practice in growing communities. Then residents elected to the board gained voting power and, for the first time, assumed responsibility for operating the association.

According to Stack, the next big change in the community was dealing with a large amount of debt—which peaked at close to \$90 million in the mid-1990s. The board whittled down the debt methodically, in part by deferring spending on big projects while maintaining basic services. The debt is down to about \$30 million today.

“We're entering the third phase,” says Stack, describing the path from developer control to board control and struggling with debt to major repairs and redevelopment now.

Today, some of the village centers need overhauling. Industrial properties and transportation infrastructure are slated for improvements. And the Downtown Columbia project is in full swing, taking advantage of the frontage on picturesque Lake Kittamaqundi. It's a bit of an adjustment for an association that relied for so long on Rouse and his company for vision and development.

There has been some grumbling among residents about the size of the Downtown Columbia project and the amount of development in the community in general, according to Beverly White-Seals, a town resident and president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Howard County, a philanthropic organization that supports local nonprofits.



Columbia at a Glance

LOCATION

Howard County, Md., between Baltimore, Md., and Washington, D.C.

SIZE

32 square miles

POPULATION

Just over 100,000

ANNUAL ASSOCIATION BUDGET

\$76,846,000

AVERAGE HOME VALUE

\$335,200, forecast to rise 1.7 percent in the coming year

AVERAGE PROPERTY TAX BILL

\$4,442

DEMOGRAPHICS

55 percent white; 25 percent black;
12 percent Asian; 8 percent Hispanic



“Everybody wants to stop development after they get their house,” she says.

Whether residents like it or not, development is coming to the region—in Columbia and all around it.

“As D.C. and Baltimore meet, Howard County and Columbia are right in the middle,” says Matthews. “We’re positioned to grow—business and residential—exponentially over the next 15 to 20 years.”

Meanwhile, plans are being finalized for Columbia’s 50th birthday party, entitled “Appreciate the Past and Imagine the Future.” Beginning in March and culminating in September, a range of special events will highlight the town’s story. Residents are creating activities, exhibits, and performances reflecting Columbia, and they’re sharing five decades of memories.

But Columbia doesn’t reserve its activism for special occasions. Speakers present regularly on thought-provoking topics in its popular Community Building Speakers Series. Excite Columbia—evenings meetings that run for several weeks—serves as an orientation session for residents.

Sports, fitness, and cultural activities, such as jazz bands and poetry readings, are popular too.

Merriweather Post Pavilion, an independently run outdoor concert venue, features top acts in rock, country, rhythm and blues, pop, jazz, hip hop, alternative, electronica, and classical music. Jackson Browne recorded his hit “Running on Empty” there.



The Lakefront Summer Festival brings families and neighbors together. Dog Day Afternoon is an annual event that helps canine owners bond.

THE COLUMBIA DRAW

Valerie Montague has lived in Columbia for more than 20 years. Her first go-around was while she was growing up. Years later, she bought her parents’ house and began raising her own family.

“I feel safe in Columbia. I have biracial kids. Columbia is very racially tolerant,” she says, noting that’s the primary reason she returned. “And the schools are outstanding. It’s a community where parents are extremely involved. If there’s a meeting related to schools, people show up.”

Montague also likes that residents are informed and involved.

“There’s a volunteer group to fit almost anything you can think of,” she says.

Columbia’s natural beauty is of particular interest to Ned Tillman, who has lived in the community for 30 years. As a volunteer, Tillman leads nature walks in which he describes how the environment has been preserved in the face of growth. As many as 180 people have turned out for the excursions.

“It’s important to see how man and nature have co-evolved,” he says.

In addition to standbys such as egrets and ospreys, there are now pileated woodpeckers and flying squirrels.

“We have a lot more species than 50 years ago,” Tillman notes.

Milestones

IN COLUMBIA'S HISTORY

Residents are doing their part by installing rain gardens and nurturing native plants in their yards. He says Columbia has spent a lot of time on stormwater runoff plans to avert the floods that have ravaged some other communities in the state.

Tillman also sees some aspects of Columbia coming full circle.

“We were built to have village centers where everybody walked to shop. We got away from that for a couple of decades,” he says, noting that the concept is being reinforced by redesigning streets and adding bicycle lanes to make it easier to get around without driving.

White-Seals came to Columbia in 1979 as an attorney for the Rouse Co. and quickly became enamored with the community’s focus on the environment and diversity. She emphasizes how Rouse was ahead of his time in insisting that people of all races and ethnic backgrounds should mix in the new town. “Nobody was taking that for granted in the 1960s,” a time when race-restrictive covenants were still common, she notes.

She also says she’s proud that Columbia provides substantial opportunities for low-income owners through affordable and federally subsidized housing; the association estimates that approximately 8 percent of units in the area are subsidized.

But there still are homeless people and people in need, she says. “Many people don’t even see it.”

White-Seals recalls giving a bus tour to a delegation from South Africa in the early 1990s. She pointed out some affordable housing units, but all a visitor saw was attractive homes surrounded by flowers. The visitor asked White-Seals to back up the bus so that the delegation could take another look. White-Seals said that wasn’t necessary. The visitor responded with surprise and delight, “They’re behind the begonias?”

“One of the things that keeps Columbia fresh is that we’re still very much proponents of those original social concepts that were very important to Mr. Rouse,” says Matthews. “We want to make sure that, going back to Mr. Rouse’s original plan, regardless of your economic level, you can live in Columbia.”

- 1962** First land purchased.
- 1965** Howard County government approves “new town” zoning.
- 1967** First residents move in; first village center opens.
- 1971** The Mall in Columbia opens.
- 1976** King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden visits.
- 1982** Control of Columbia Association transferred to elected residents.
- 1996** Developer James Rouse dies.
- 2000** First Starbucks opens.
- 2006** Downtown Columbia draft master plan released.
- 2010** Downtown Columbia master plan approved.



Adds Matthews: “What I see happening in Columbia now, especially reaching its 50th birthday, is the evolution of any community. You go through your redevelopment phase. The redevelopment that’s happening in the downtown area is what I believe Mr. Rouse originally planned as far as the intensity and the density of it.”

Matthews says that one of the chief reasons for Columbia’s success is its emphasis on building relationships. “We want to have the proverbial seat at the table, and we get that by building relationships. We build them with the county. We build them with the developers. We build them with our community partners.”

No one can predict what the next 50 years will bring for Columbia, but officials and residents are optimistic. Says Matthews: “It’s a work in progress.” **CG**

Steve Bates is a freelance writer in the Washington, D.C., area.

COURTESY COLUMBIA ASSOCIATION (BOTTOM RIGHT)



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