



American Planning Association *Making Great Communities Happen*

Planning — August/September 2011

Reston Revisited

The famous new town is still evolving.

By John W. Clark

Fifty years ago Robert E. Simon fell in love with a stretch of land in Fairfax County, Virginia, 20 miles from Washington, D.C., and bought it for the new town whose name is derived from his initials: Reston. Now, at 97, Simon lives in Reston's Lake Anne development and remains the town's spiritual father. Although no longer directly responsible for the town's development, he approves of many of the changes that have occurred — and those that are pending in this still evolving, built-from-scratch community.

Simon's goals for his new town were inclusive. Economic success, he felt, would flow from the harmonious way the town met peoples' needs for work and home life. The living environment should include everything needed for an entire lifetime, he strongly believed. Also, natural and architectural beauty should be primary, and — for the sake of diversity — race, age, and socioeconomic levels should be comfortably mixed (a unique idea in Virginia in the early 1960s, before the 1968 federal Civil Rights Act was adopted). It was this vision and, importantly, its execution — a town built to serve the needs of its residents rather than evolving from a patchwork of past and present overlaid with a "look" — that has made Reston successful.

When Reston was founded in the mid-1960s, its basic concept was highly innovative. The original zoning was defined by residential density that allowed a diversity of housing types, including single family, town house, and apartment or condominium, which was unusual for the time. Fairfax County was then dominated by single-family detached housing. Reston's suburban location, and its limited access, made this a difficult precedent to break.

Although much has happened since 1961, in many ways Reston's development has proceeded along the lines that Simon envisioned. In some ways, Reston has fulfilled it, by achieving a density and a live-work environment that is rare in most suburbs. Reston's Lake Anne development remains a remarkable example of architecture integrated with nature.

Today, residents are still talking about some of his original ideas while facing some major changes, including a long-anticipated link to Washington Metrorail, the regional rail system.



Some history

In the early 1960s, Simon planned a high-density Town Center. Finding existing zoning categories too restrictive, he persuaded Fairfax County to create a new category, Planned Residential Community, which gave him the blend of zoning uses and flexibility he desired. He lost control of its development in 1967, when Gulf Reston, Inc., a subsidiary of Gulf Oil Real Estate Development Corporation, a major investor, took over as master developer.

In 1978, before much was done on the development of Reston's Town Center, the Mobil Oil Corporation bought the remaining undeveloped land. It formed Reston Land Corporation to continue as the master developer of Reston. Reston Land started master planning Reston Town Center — downtown — using RTKL and Land Design Research as its master planning team in 1982. In 1984, RLC selected Himmel/Miller-Klutznick-Davis-Gray as its development partner for Phase I of Reston Town Center. The joint venture engaged RTKL, a Baltimore-based architecture firm, and Sasaki Associates as its landscape architects in 1984.

Reston Land continued as the master developer until it sold its holdings to Terrabrook (a subsidiary of Westbrook Partners), which took over as master developer in 1996. Over the next seven years Terrabrook joint ventured, developed, or sold its remaining holdings. Various other owners and developers have been involved since 2003. The community is involved in the planning and approval process, while the Fairfax Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors retain final control over development.

The Reston Land master plan for Reston Town Center took form in 1982 and achieved zoning approval in 1987. Phase 1 of Reston Town Center commenced construction in 1988 and opened in 1990. The original master plan for the core of Reston Town Center has accommodated the evolution in the market over the years.

Within its 11 square miles, Reston *as a whole* combines restaurant, retail, hotel, residential, and office development, with some buildings of 16 and 18 stories — which is fairly dense compared to neighboring communities. Development outside the core is now being planned for redevelopment in anticipation of Metrorail coming to Reston within a few years.

RTKL's master plan is in certain ways reminiscent of a 1963–64 plan commissioned by Simon and completed by Whittlesey & Conklin in that it maintains a traditional street grid, with tree-lined sidewalks and a pedestrian-friendly main street. Within Reston Town Center, key streets are private rather than public, so they can be closed off for events, which occur frequently.

What resulted was enough population density to give residents an urban experience without having to travel to a major city such as Washington, D.C. For example, Fountain Square, which opened in 1990, is framed by semicircular buildings and features a glass roofed pavilion, built in 1993, that distantly recalls the "crystal palace" at the core of Ebenezer Howard's garden cities. It hosts concerts,

festivals, children's events, and ice skating in the winter. The variety of events and constant activity made Town Center attractive to visitors from Virginia, Washington, and Maryland, boosting retail and restaurant sales.

"Fountain Square is an ideal plaza. I think it is just about perfect," noted Simon in a September 2010 interview in *Reston Patch*, an online news site. "It is a gathering place, as a plaza is supposed to be. Mixed use, of course, [with] places to sit outside, places to go inside, a skating rink, a movie theatre." In contrast the nearby park, Simon told me, never really worked and is being redesigned.

From exurb to suburb

In the 1980s, when the Dulles Toll Road opened — running from the Washington Beltway to Dulles International Airport, 26 miles west of the White House — Reston began to attract new jobs and residents, which changed its status from exurb to suburb. By late 1988 Reston had more than 1,400 companies and 31,000 workers — more than 1.5 jobs per household. Today, it has about 466,000 square feet of industrial space, 1.7 million square feet of retail development, and a population of about 62,000.

A broad employment base — major companies with offices in Reston include Google, Accenture, Sprint, Oracle, Rolls Royce's Northern American headquarters, College Board, Northrop Grumman — is helping to make it a sustainable community.

Through densification and phased development that has encouraged diverse building styles, Reston provides a clear alternative to suburban sprawl. Architect Robert A.M. Stern, who designed one of the residential complexes in Reston, has likened it to such older, walkable suburban cities as White Plains, New York; Stamford, Connecticut; and Evanston, Illinois. That these other cities have matured over much longer time spans is a tribute to Reston's rapid achievement.

Reston Town Center is a commercial success. Its rental rates are higher than similar office space in adjacent areas, its vacancy rates are low, and its shops and street life reinforce the urban feel. Reston is the second largest office market in Fairfax County, with 20 million square feet of space.

"This town center is a novel effort to apply the lessons of Jane Jacobs and traditional downtowns to a commercial real estate development," Witold Rybczynski writes in his recent book, *Makeshift Metropolis: Ideas about Cities*.



Deviation from the plan

Yet Town Center lacks the pedestrian connectivity and response to nature that was central to Simon's vision. Although Reston has generous manmade lakes and 800 acres of parkland, including woods and meadows, most of the open space is separated from the commercial area by busy arterial streets.

In Simon's earlier plans for Town Center, he and his planners wanted to connect it to the adjacent residential community. After wrestling with the problem of how to straddle the road that eventually became Reston Parkway, the designers decided to move the town center east of it to make access from surrounding villages easier. Later it was repositioned to the west of Reston Parkway, and today pedestrians and bicyclists can cross the parkway using a tunnel at the southern end of Town Center or an at-grade crossing of the Washington & Old Dominion Trail.

Today some local people have been trying to resurrect ideas that Simon and his planners advocated for Reston Parkway: The current notion is to cross the Dulles Tollway by building next to and above it and bridging it with businesses and housing. Some residents want the air rights to be developed — mostly as a way to connect the northern and southern parts of the town. As Scott Monett, president of TysonsTunnel.org points out, that strategy would also provide better access for the new rail lines being planned for the toll road medium.

Urban planner and landscape architect Guy Rando, who lives in the Lake Anne section of Reston, has proposed another way to enclose rail and toll road in a tunnel and to bridge above it with mixed use development. His scheme is much greener than earlier ideas along these lines, with hanging gardens and massed landscaping that climbs the architecture. Yet the scale at which these schemes are conceived makes them unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Rail comes to town

Reston Town Center's consolidated, compact design in a sense anticipated a future rail connection. But rail has been a long time arriving.

Washington's Metrorail is scheduled to reach Reston soon. A first station is under construction at Wiehle Avenue, close to Simon's original Lake Anne development, and is expected to open in 2013. A second station, at Reston Parkway, serving Reston Town Center, is scheduled to open in late 2016 or early 2017. (There has been criticism over the Reston Parkway station's location, as it is not within Town Center. However, developers plan to extend the town center development to reach the station.)

Back in the 1980s, developer Hunter Richardson recalls, "There was no prospect of rail to Reston or Dulles Airport during the time frame we thought it would take to fully develop Reston. Metrorail had no plans to fund rail to Dulles at the time."

Today, Richardson is still uncertain that Metro's Phase II rail link to Dulles Airport will be complete in the next few years, and he says he's glad he didn't bank decades of his development career on rail in Reston.

Yet rail finally is arriving, and many are enthusiastic about it. "This is [Reston's] greatest moment since its founding," architecture critic Paul Goldberger told attendees at a Reston town meeting last October. "We want places to be denser. We want to strengthen urban cores and encourage more walking. There could not be a better time, then, for Metrorail to be coming to Reston."

Goldberger sees rail transportation as the continuation of a great tradition. "Reston needs to fulfill its destiny to become a true regional center, a place that shows it is possible to incorporate density and energy and culture, the things we like so much about cities, and make them compatible with the twenty-first century and the reality of the automobile," he said in an October 2010 interview in the *Reston Patch*. "And this is where the coming of Metrorail offers such an incredible opportunity."

But the design of the new Reston Parkway Metrorail station, planned for the intersection of the Dulles Toll Road and Reston Parkway, will be critical. When built, the station will link Reston Town Center to the rest of the Washington metropolitan area and reinforce Reston's status as an increasingly urban suburb.

However, founder Robert Simon and others stress that the rail link needs a comprehensive lateral transportation network, including an expanded public bus system, in order to work. Simon has warned about the tremendous congestion that automobiles will cause at the Metrorail stops without a sufficient bus system to serve them.

Looking ahead

Since its inception, Reston's special nature has not been lost on its citizens, many of whom are actively engaged in helping to steer its future through careful and innovative planning. Planning is

enthusiastically discussed and debated. Current changes will especially affect the Town Center area. While discussing them and this article, Simon stressed that it is important to remember that Town Center is not yet finished.

Simon obviously approves of some of the current thinking. One example: A large central park surrounded by high-rise residential buildings, modeled after New York City's Central Park, has been proposed for North Town Center.

Robert Goudie is cochair, with Pete Otteni, of the Town Center Committee of the Reston Master Plan Special Study Task Force. The committee's final report, published in October 2010, forecasts an improved Reston after Metrorail reaches Wiehle Avenue — a major thoroughfare — within a few years.

The report focuses on increasing density and residences in the Town Center area, and it recommends extending the urban core south to the new station. Also recommended is a seven- to eight-acre central park to the north. Further, the report suggests promoting denser, mixed use development with far more residential use, aiming at a 1:1 ratio of residential to office and commercial space, moving the area just south of the toll road at the Metrorail station away from its current suburban office paradigm.

Goudie explains that this ratio translates to about four jobs per household — significantly improved from where it is today, and making Reston an even more self-sufficient, independent community.

Like all the Reston residents I spoke with for this article, Robert Goudie is enthusiastic about his community. "I'm bullish about the future of Town Center," he says. It seems that Robert Simon's vision of half a century ago has new life, new adherents, and a firm direction.

John W. Clark, a Chicago-based architect and planner, is a partner in the firm Cordogan, Clark & Associates.

Resources

Images: Top — An ice skating rink housed in a glass roofed pavilion in Fountain Square. Bottom — Fountain Square is the heart of Reston Town Center, hosting festivals and concerts. Photos by Jim Kirby.

©Copyright 2010 American Planning Association All Rights Reserved