CHAPTER 5

The New Town of Columbia, Maryland*

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America has become an urban nation. Since 1920, when a census first showed that more of the population was living in urban than in rural areas, the trend toward urbanization has transformed American life. By 1970, 74% of the population lived in cities of more than 2500; 69% in one of the 243 “standard metropolitan statistical areas” (consisting of a core city of at least 50,000 plus contiguous urbanized counties). These megalopolises—263 as of 1972—for the most part exhibit a now familiar pattern: an inner city of older buildings, high in density, whose shrinking population consists increasingly of the black, the poor, and the old; and a spreading suburban ring, defended by zoning, of low-density housing occupied mainly by middle-class whites, many of whom commute to jobs in the city.¹

Few believe this sociological and economic cleavage to be healthy—for the suburbanite or for the inner-city dweller. The cities, losing their most taxable citizens, are left with a bitter and dependent population. And the suburbanite finds long commutes wearying and the cultural life less than stimulating. Both life-styles lack what some observers have struggled to define as a sense of “community,” of belonging and relatedness. Yet, given a choice between the two, most Americans have been opting for suburbia;

* This chapter is co-authored with Constance Hellyer.

¹ R. Moos et al., Environment and Utopia
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80% of the total population increase in our metropolitan areas has occurred in the suburbs.  

Suburban growth has occurred in the absence of any national policy or program, as has the development of individual suburbs. "Our cities grow by accident," observed James Rouse, a Maryland mortgage banker and developer who founded the new city of Columbia:

A farm is sold and begins raising houses instead of potatoes—then another farm. . . . kids overflow the schools—here a new school is built—then a church. . . . Traffic grows; roads are widened; service stations, Tastee Freez, hamburger stands pockmark the highway. Traffic strangles. Relentlessly, the bits and pieces of a city are splattered across the landscape. By this irrational process, non-communities are born—formless places, without order, beauty or reason; with no visible respect for people or the land. Thousands of small, separate decisions—made with little or no relationship to one another, nor to their composite impact—produce a major decision about the future of our cities and our civilization—a decision we have come to label "suburban sprawl." 

Rouse felt the results of such helter-skelter development to be "anti-human":

The vast, formless spread of housing, pierced by the unrelated spotting of schools, churches, stores, creates areas so huge and irrational that they are out of scale with people—beyond their grasp and comprehension—too big for people to feel a part of, responsible for, important in. The individual is immersed in the mass. What nonsense this is. What reckless, irresponsible dissipation of nature's endowment and man's hopes for dignity, beauty, growth.

Feeling strongly that there was a better way to accommodate to America's growing population and its taste for suburban amenities, Rouse set out to create a development in which that elusive "sense of community" would be fostered: the new city of Columbia, Maryland.

The "New Towns movement," as a utopian—or at least reformist—effort at creating an alternative and superior form of city life, owes its recent impetus to the work of an Englishman, Ebenezer Howard (1850–1928). In the England of Howard's day, industrialization had created a rearrangement of the population, which, while somewhat different from that in contemporary America, still represented a drastic and unplanned change. People swarmed from the countryside to the industrial centers, aptly described by Howard (a Londoner) as "crowded, ill-ventilated, unplanned, unwieldy, unhealthy cities—ulcers on the very face of our beautiful island." As the key to the evolution of a "higher and better form of industrial life," Howard put forward his far-reaching and audacious proposal: the creation of