

# Notable efforts to meet emerging housing needs

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

This is a landmark year in the historical development of housing in the nation, and Rhode Island almost became a part of this bigger picture. One noteworthy event has already taken place, and two special birthdays are being observed throughout the year.

Early this year, somewhere in the country but most likely in the South, where one-third of all housing units are located, the 100 millionth housing unit was completed, according to the United States Census Bureau. And the space and amenities that characterize this structure are a measure of the increasing affluence of the 245 million people who live here.

Typically, this new, single-family, free-standing house was most likely to be owner-occupied, have more than 1800 square feet of living space (three times that of the typical unfinished Cape Cod house that was most common after World War II), have fewer people occupying it than just five years ago, be air-conditioned, have a fireplace and a two-car garage and sell at for an average price of \$96,000.

Beyond the detached structure itself is the setting in which it is built, and nowhere is this shown better than in two planned developments celebrating birthdays this year—Levittown, N.Y.,

on Long Island is 40 years old, while Columbia, Md., is observing its 20th birthday.

## Mass production

The mass-production construction techniques pioneered by William J. Levitt in 1944 were a response to a massive demand for housing that came after a decade of economic depression and a four-year war. At one stage, 100 houses were built each day, growing to 17,447 houses in four years. Almost without exception, these 800-square-foot houses sheltered many children, for this was the beginning of the baby boom.

This massive and efficient construction venture supplied houses of little architectural variety that sold for less than \$7000 but, reflecting the times, were to be occupied and used only by whites. And the lines to buy formed early. Today, these now-improved houses sell for \$160,000.

Two predictions for this large-scale development were made, one of which came true and one of which did not. Building only houses on such a large scale, and not the commercial and industrial developments that add to a community's tax base, has meant high property taxes, taxes, which today approach \$4000 per house. But the dour forecast that these would be instant slums is certainly not the case, for the houses have been maintained and improved to reflect the

values of the workers and professionals who moved here 40 years ago.

Twenty years later, another developer had a better idea: Instead of building only houses, why not build a community? Today Columbia is one of this country's most successful new towns, with 70,000 people of the projected 100,000 now occupying a variety of houses in the rolling hills just 20 miles northwest of Washington, D.C.

James Rouse, now identified with revitalized city centers such as Faneuil Hall in Boston, Harborplace in Baltimore, Grand Avenue in Milwaukee and others, had an earlier vision of a planned community that would house all types of people from all income levels. Columbia has housing that ranges from the subsidized to some of the highest-priced in the Washington area, and, as several blacks have told me on different occasions, "This is the only place I know where I can rent or buy wherever I want."

## In harmony

Far different from a Levittown, Columbia has proportionately more blacks than any community in Rhode Island and has demonstrated that blacks and whites can live together in harmony in the suburbs.

Financially viable today, Columbia has demonstrated that new communi-

ties offer opportunities not found in typical suburbs, but that they require both commitment and expertise, something only a few other developers have achieved, even with federal government support.

And to think that Columbia might have been in Rhode Island if the Rouse company could have found 15,000 acres on which to put its town, for the area between Providence and Boston was one of the potential sites. But there were too many individual owners, and it was impossible to assemble the land.

Happy birthday wishes are in order for both Levittown and Columbia, for they reflect periods in our housing history that tell us something of the times, something of our society and something of the innovative minds that respond to meeting the housing and community needs of the varied residents in this country.

Whether we live in such planned communities or not, all of us have benefitted from the massive commitment to house Americans under some of the best living conditions of any nation in the world. And although there is still much to do in terms of providing for the less fortunate, the 100 millionth house is a reminder of what we can do if we put our minds and resources to it. □

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