The Conscience of
JAMES ROUSE

A vision of decent housing for the poor now drives the man who gave us glitzy malls and festival marketplaces.

BY ROBERT K. LANDERS

ow starting the eighth decade of his exceptional life, developer James Wilson Rouse is a deceptively ordinary-looking man. A caricaturist would have to make do with a lopsided grin, a bald and mottled head (gray hair still valiantly in possession of the outskirts), tortoise-shell glasses, tufted eyebrows that resolutely go their own ways and, perhaps, a silver-and-gold tie pin he wears, a symbol of Columbia, Md.—the trim utopia he created midway between Baltimore and Washington. The pin is a little figure with arms upraised, gingerbread humanity reaching out.

Simple, yet quite possibly profound, the image seems a fit one, not only for Rouse’s hopeful vision of mankind but for Jim Rouse himself, ever striving to reach out and give mankind an assist.

In his benevolent bearing there is no hint of the imperial. Neither his business success nor the great impact he has had on the American scene has led him to suppose himself a god. His head is unswelled—but far from empty.

“He’s a man of ideas,” said the late Morton Hoppenfeld, an architect and long-time associate. “He’s a wizard in terms of financing and economic ideas, as well as marketing and merchandising and ideas about quality of life. What he can do with numbers will boggle your mind.”

Financial wizardry underwrote Rouse’s far-sighted ideas. During the 1950s and ’60s, he and his development firm, The Rouse Company, helped to give new meaning to the word mall and so, in a sense, to suburbia itself. Their Harundale Mall, which opened in Glen...
Burnie, Md., in 1958, was among the first such enclosed Edens in the country. Rouse led—and the malling of suburbia followed.

Then, during the 1970s and '80s, Rouse and company, hot on the demographic trail back to urbia, confounded the usual hidebound skeptics and succeeded in giving new allure to several historic port cities, in the form of vibrant "festival marketplaces." Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston and Harborplace in Baltimore were immense successes.

Rouse has been praised for imaginatively preserving history, as well as criticized for giving it an unrealistic gloss—Rouse-ification, the process has been dubbed. The company's South Street Seaport in Manhattan got mixed reviews at its opening two years ago. "Something was lost as well as gained in converting a blue-collar neighborhood into a kind of outdoor mall," wrote Christian Science Monitor architectural critic Jane Holtz Kay.

Still, glittery "outdoor malls" arising in the centers of cities once thought doomed represented good news, exciting news. And in 1981, Time canonized Rouse in a cover story, calling him "an urban visionary" with "a unique and uncanny ability to blend commerce and showmanship into a magnetizing force in the inner city."

Thus anointed, and retired since 1979 from The Rouse Company, Jim Rouse is now attempting an even more impressive feat. He is seeking to make housing for the poor in America's cities fit and livable. And to finance his cause he is continuing to dot the urban landscape with festival marketplaces, albeit smaller ones, in medium-sized cities from Norfolk, Va., to Toledo, Ohio.

Rouse's grand crusade began in 1981. He formed the nonprofit Enterprise Foundation to aid neighborhood housing groups, and, at the same time, he created the Enterprise Development Company as its for-profit subsidiary. Until the company is in the black, however, the foundation must depend mainly on corporate and individual donations. By the middle '90s, our forecast says that we'll be able to pour $5 million to $10 million a year into the foundation," Rouse says.

Serving as chairman of the board and chief executive officer of both is Rouse himself, this avuncular figure sipping diet Sprite from a Styrofoam cup as he sits at a round table in his modestly appointed office in Columbia and talks with a visitor.

Rouse has never pretended to be a corporate manager, according to Mort Hoppenfeld. "He doesn't engage in the disciplines of getting things done; he brings people around him to do that."

Yet he is very much involved in the important decisions, wants to know every detail and, in the words of Enterprise Development President Aubrey Gorman, is "relentless in his insistence that things be done the right way."

When not in his office, Rouse is often not far away, working in the unpretentious Columbia home he shares with his wife, Patty. A former commissioner of the Redevelopment and Housing Authority of Norfolk, Va., she is involved in Enterprise, too. They work together at their dining-room table or on their bright porch with its wide view of man-made Wilde Lake.

About to head for home this evening, Rouse, the last to leave, closes up Enterprise Development's offices. Fumbling for the right door key, he tells his visitor that Enterprise's publicity "is way ahead of our performance—we haven't done that much." Ambling down the hall and greeting everyone he meets, he seems an old-fashioned figure from mythic America—working hard and living happily in some impossibly virtuous small-town Arcadia.

Rouse's manner may conjure up the quaint America of Norman Rockwell, but his great successes, and perhaps more admirable failures, have taken place in a larger, more complicated and altogether less satisfactory world—the real one.

He was born to affluence on Maryland's Eastern Shore, the son of a canned-goods broker and the youngest of six children. He grew up happily in the small town of Easton. But in the late 1920s, his father lost almost everything. Then, in 1930, came a series of hammer blows. His mother died in February, his father died in August and the bank foreclosed on their home in October. Rouse, newly graduated from high school, was 16.

Even then, optimism stirred within him. "Of course, I knew we were getting into the Depression, and the whole economy wasn't too good, but I can remember feeling—and, in a way, feel a little embarrassed about feeling—that this was really good for me, that I was going to have to make it and that I was young."

"As the years went on, 1931, '32, '33, I remember how much luckier I used to feel than those older men whose lives were really blown apart. . . . It was a very, very tough, tough, tough time for, fine people who had thought their lives were secure. I've never quite forgotten that. The Depression hangover is a very substantial one; you never can really feel safe."

Survivor Rouse went to the University of Maryland night law school in 1933 and got a job parking cars. In 1934 he got a better job—legal clerk in the new Federal Housing Administration's Baltimore office. Two years later he persuaded the Title Guarantee & Trust Company to let him set up a mortgage department; he would find insurance companies daring enough to buy the new and controversial FHA mortgages, and then he would sell them to the insurance companies. In 1939 he and another young man, Hunter Moss, borrowed $20,000 and formed their

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own mortgage-banking firm in Baltimore, The Moss-Rouse Company. It eventually became Rouse Real Estate Finance and was sold last year to the Paine-Webber Group, Inc. for stock valued at $50.5 million.

Just as an FHA clerkship had led Rouse to mortgage banking, so mortgage banking was to lead him to development and his profound concern with the urban condition.

"I think that if you’re in real estate finance or development,” he reflects, "you’re automatically drawn into a much deeper, wider spectrum of urban life than a manufacturer or a banker or a merchant, unless he reaches out. That’s because what you’re doing is financing, or developing, the pieces of a city, and, therefore, the city is your playing field."

But before all that could happen, World War II intervened, thrusting Rouse into Naval Air Intelligence and service on the staff of the commander of the Air Force Pacific Fleet—a very, very fascinating job with remarkable people.” They, in turn, found Rouse pretty remarkable himself, not least at playing poker. "During his entire tour of duty in Hawaii,” author Boyd Gibbons writes in Wye Island, "Jim Rouse drew no Navy pay; he lived entirely on his card winnings."

Some of those “remarkable people” he got to know during-the war, men such as investment banker August Belmont, were to be extremely helpful to Rouse in the 1950s, when he was getting into shopping-center development.

That was in the future, however. The war over, Rouse returned to Baltimore, mortgage banking—and involvement in urban affairs. During the late 1940s, he appeared before congressional committees in Washington and testified on behalf of the Mortgage Bankers Association. Although he was strongly in favor of urban redevelopment, he opposed public housing. He argued, as he remembers, “that the real job in America—then and now—is to make the existing housing inventory fit and livable.” Once that “real job” were done, with government assistance, then there would be only a residual need for public housing.

Rouse came away from Washington somewhat disillusioned and thinking he might be able to do more without Con-

gress than with it. "I really found myself making a very important decision: If you wanted to do anything about these kinds of issues, you had to do them—you couldn’t be trying to get somebody else to do them."

He soon got directly involved in an effort to improve slum housing in Baltimore, using what he now calls “the primitive instrument” of vigorous enforcement of existing laws. "In a block with fewer than 400 people," Rouse recalls, "they killed 450 rats, took out 46 truckloads of debris and required installation of inside toilets.” The effort was then expanded to a 23-block area near Johns Hopkins University. The anti-slum effort was only modestly successful, however, and most of the gains proved transient. Still, the experience was valuable to him.

The “gingerbread man” in Rouse reached out well beyond Baltimore. Serving as a member of President Eisenhower’s Advisory Committee on Housing Programs and Policies (1953-4), Rouse recalls, he had just read Miles Cole’s Renewing Our Cities and, working late, came up at three one morning with the phrase urban renewal to describe the aim of a comprehensive program of redevelopment, rehabilitation and conservation.

The actual program that followed turned out to be less comprehensive than Rouse had hoped, but he still maintains that urban renewal was, on the whole, a great success. "American cities are enormously better off as cities than they would ever have been without it,” he says.

Although he considers urban renewal to have been a success, Rouse did tell Life magazine in the mid 1960s, when he was bringing Columbia into being: “If I had all the dollars in the urban-renewal program, I would take them all and put them on the line to produce one real image of what a city could be.”

Rouse originally hoped that Columbia would be so dramatic a success that it would be widely imitated. That did not happen. Columbia was a success, but not, in financial terms, a stunning success. There have been no imitators.

Columbia was not Rouse’s only attempt at arranging a dramatic demonstration of urban potential. Nor has he stopped trying. The Enterprise Foundation is hoping to get one city, perhaps two, to join in a commitment to make all the housing in that city fit and livable within a decade.

It was a spring day, a decade ago, and Rosa Smith could scarcely believe her ears. A white woman, Barbara Moore, was actually inviting her to lunch in her home. Smith went, expecting to eat from a paper plate “so that it could be thrown out afterwards. But it was entirely different... It was just so wonderful, so nice.”

Certainly, nothing like that had ever happened back in Rocky Mount, N.C., where Smith, a sharecropper’s daughter, had grown up. She had ventured north to Washington, D.C., in 1965, coming alone. She was 17. She had dropped out of school in the tenth grade, given birth and left her son behind to be raised by her mother.

In Washington, Smith found work at various places, but by 1973, she was on welfare, the mother of three more children, and living with them in a cramped apartment. That November, in search of more room, she reluctantly moved into the Ritz, an apartment building in the Adams-Morgan section which, despite its name, was in
wretched condition and "a little dangerous." The elevator in the five-story tenement did not work, and there were no trash pickups. Frustrated residents left their garbage in hallways, threw it out windows, dropped it down stairwells. The stench was terrible, the rats were big.

Unbeknown to Smith, the 60-unit Ritz and a smaller apartment building nearby, the Mozart, had just been bought by Jim Rouse.

Rouse, who remained in the background, was acting in concert with Barbara Moore and several other members of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, who had formed Jubilee Housing, a non-profit corporation. Jubilee leased the two buildings from Rouse and ran them. (In 1978, with funds it raised and a mortgage from Rouse, Jubilee bought the building from him.)

"When Jubilee came in," Rosa Smith remembers, "I didn't like them, and no one else in the building liked them, because we assumed that these white people were coming to clean up the building and move all of us out."

Then Smith went to one of Jubilee's Saturday work parties and discovered that she could use a hammer and paint brush. In those early years, volunteers at the two buildings put in more than 50,000 hours, working to correct hundreds of housing-code violations.

Rosa Smith later became the salaried manager of the Ritz and the Mozart. She is one of Jubilee's success stories. There are others.

Jubilee acquired more buildings, got a $1.5 million HUD grant in 1978 and won increasing corporate support. Jubilee also spawned allied enterprises, among them Jubilee Jobs, a nonprofit employment agency which last year placed 558 people in unskilled jobs.

Still, "This is tough stuff," Rouse observes. "There aren't poor people sitting there, just waiting to be served, and in go white people and they fix up apartments and it all goes along in a merry way. These are real battlegrounds where this is going on."

The example of Jubilee, dealing with "broken people" as much as broken buildings, inspired more than just the creation of several similar groups in Baltimore, Oakland and elsewhere. Jubilee led Rouse to create Enterprise, and now the Enterprise network has grown, at last count, to 42 neighborhood groups in 22 cities, among them Denver, Dallas, Detroit, Chicago and Philadelphia.

The foundation's assistance comes in various forms. Enterprise has provided more than $5 million in loans and some grants. "We generally see our money as what we call linchpin money," explains Rouse. "It's money to tie together other money that we can bring in to do that [particular] project." Enterprise also offers technical advice on rehabilitation and financing. It has set up a group to find new ways to cut rehabilitation costs, and it has established a for-profit subsidiary to raise money at low rates.

With help from Enterprise, more than 1,200 housing units have been or are being rehabilitated, according to Edward Quinn, the foundation's president.

That, of course, is nowhere near the 8.7 million very-low-income households in America said to be living in rental housing that is physically inadequate, too crowded or too costly.

Rouse and Quinn freely acknowledge that only with federal money and cities' involvement can the massive problem be solved. Meanwhile, however, there are people in neighborhoods, people with money—and Enterprise.

"Our whole conviction," Quinn says passionately, "is that there are thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people out there who really want to do good. If you provide a process where people with resources, even modest resources, can be linked up with people with needs... then you'll find people responding."

Whether people en masse will respond so generously to the plight of the ill-housed poor remains to be seen. More certain, however, is their willingness to spend money on themselves at Rouse-style marketplaces. The Waterside, a $13.8 million development on the Elizabeth River in Norfolk, was Enterprise Development's first major project. A joint venture with the city, it opened in 1983 and, by every account, has been a huge success. And it not only created about 1,300 new jobs but also stimulated, by some estimates, more than $100 million in fresh investments downtown.

Speaking one night last winter in the Grand Ballroom of New York's Plaza Hotel, Rouse told the well-dressed flower of the construction industry in his earnest and passionate way: "We're working through a foundation with the mentality of business, with an entrepreneurial spirit... instead of just standing back before these problems and looking for government help... We believe we're working on a problem of crucial importance to our country and our civilization."

And Jim Rouse does not seem to doubt seriously that the problem is capable of rational solution. He is, on principle, an optimist. "I don't feel obliged to be practical, in the common judgment of what's practical," he explains. "I feel that it is legitimate to search for all the practical reasons that try to make it happen, rather than to search for the best that might be and looking for government help... We believe we're working on a problem of crucial importance to our country and our civilization."

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