

A Crucial Test for American Town Planning

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

An agreement was signed earlier this month between Robert E. Simon Jr., developer of the new town of Reston, Va., and the Gulf Oil Corporation, creating Gulf-Reston, Inc. On that day, this country's most closely watched new community changed from one man's dream to a corporate subsidiary.

The question being asked is what will happen to Reston now? This remarkable, pioneering experiment in a superior brand of new-town design has broad implications for a country faced with a housing crisis and disappearing open land. The question is much larger than Reston's population of approximately 2,500 (80,000 projected for 1980) and its 7,400 acres of lovely, rolling Virginia countryside would indicate. It concerns the future planning of countless new American communities.

Against the Stream

Reston may have been one man's dream (even its name is built out of his initials), but in six years it has become the nation's model. In those six years it ran on faith, hope and desperate, last-minute injections of cash. It also ran counter to every standard practice and procedure of conventional real estate development.

Standard practice means the

sleazy subdivision and the asphalted shopping center, the familiar fast-buck operation, composed of short-term, quick profit, in-and-out financing and instant obsolescence. Reston is a long-range capital investment. It coordinates sociology and design, nature and building, to create a sensitive, extremely handsome small world and a way of life formed and molded with high art and sophistication by some of the country's best talents. Its plan promoted town houses, cluster zoning, communal open land and amenity programs, all of which meant hard crusading for local reforms and bitter battles for financing. Reston has been a combination of a tenacious personal vision and an obstacle course to excellence.

Among those who had faith and hope and came to the rescue with cash were Gulf Oil and the John Hancock Life Insurance Company. With a \$15-million long-term investment to protect and more money needed, Gulf has now taken over Reston's operations. Its new president and director of development, Robert H. Ryan, is, however, a specialist in corporate real estate ventures. Robert Simon has moved on to become chairman of the board.

Whether the Reston experiment succeeds or fails, whether its model is useful or adaptable, whether its standard of urban design and example of superior

suburbia will now be continued or simply disappear, whether it has found ways and means to build attractive, viable communities in a country where all the odds and conditions are against them—these are matters of national concern. What has been accomplished in Reston has been done in a society hostile to planning and public development, ignorant of urban design, unsympathetic to architectural quality, suspicious of housing innovation as investment, long on words and short on funds.

Private Enterprise Town

There is no state socialism here of the kind that has produced the much copied, planned towns of Vallingby and Farsta in Sweden and Tapiola in Finland. There have been none of the government studies, directives, subsidies and incentives that have created the British new towns. Reston was forced into a middle class, middle-to-high income format by having to go it alone as private enterprise; only now is the government helping with a grant for low-income housing plans. A significant part of the Reston dream has been an integrated, mixed economic community.

In this period of transition when assets and liabilities are being transferred to Gulf, Mr. Ryan does not wish to discuss Reston's future. His directive from Gulf, he says, has been

"to go down there and see if you can make this thing work." He has been told to "save" Reston.

Salvation, of course, is a matter of definition. Continuation of any kind means money. Mr. Ryan says Gulf has "patient" money and is able to take the long view that a planned community requires. Gulf frankly admits that it does not consider Reston a particularly good investment. The hard fact is that only the government or large corporations have the resources for planning, or can afford to wait for results. Then the biggest payoff comes not in dollars, but in the quality and productivity of American life and society.

The uncertainty at present is whether Gulf is concerned enough with such social and esthetic objectives to continue Reston's established programs and policies. Mr. Ryan says that his aim "is good planning and design with economic feasibility." To date, the two have been virtually irreconcilable. The great question now is: will Gulf be able to unite them on terms acceptable to corporate management that will not compromise Reston's standards and future? On the answer to this question, the success of American new-town planning will largely depend.

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