



Reston Today

Robert Simon, a living legend in Northern Virginia, soldiers on at Reston, the town he founded over 40 years ago. GARLAND POLLARD stops in at Lake Anne to see what he's up to.

Think of modern urban design history, and the Northern Virginia town of Reston comes immediately to mind. Along with Victor Gruen's creation of the first enclosed shopping mall, developer Robert Simon's construction of the new town of Reston, on an old farm in Northern Virginia in the 1960s, was one of the landmark urban planning milestones of the 20th century. Before those new towns of Celebration and Seaside, Reston's critical and commercial success proved the market for mixed-use urban-style towns in the suburbs. In an era of single-family split-levels, the old-world idea that someone might rent an apartment above a shop, on a public square, was a revolution. It was a revolution so far ahead of its time that it didn't begin to happen regularly again until the 21st century.

The genius patron behind the grand experiment was New York property developer Robert E. Simon. The story is legend—Simon sells

Carnegie Hall, which his father had bought, and falls in love with a 7,000-acre family farm that had been in Fairfax's Bowman bourbon family. Simon conjures up the new town on that property (about half the size of Manhattan) and buys it. He names the place Reston, derived from its quiet setting and Simon's initials—R.E.S.ton.

Head down to Lake Anne today and you are as likely to see the bronze statue of Robert Simon sitting there by the lake as you are to actually see Simon himself. And you might see the real Bob Simon more than the statue. Last year, the statue was stolen and then returned, further evidence that the legend of Bob Simon will continue to grow. Today, most think of the Simon of the past, a historical figure. In fact Simon, 91, is healthy as ever, living in a condo atop Reston's Lake Anne Village (named for his late wife, Anne) and thinking again about the future of his

much-celebrated town.

"It needs more people," says Simon from his art-filled 11th-floor condominium overlooking Lake Anne. Just back from a trip to see Machu Picchu, Simon is happy to play the role of elder statesman, entertaining the odd student or developer coming by his apartment for Simon's wisdom, which he graciously imparts. But Simon, whose career is on file in George Mason University's archives, does not live in the past.

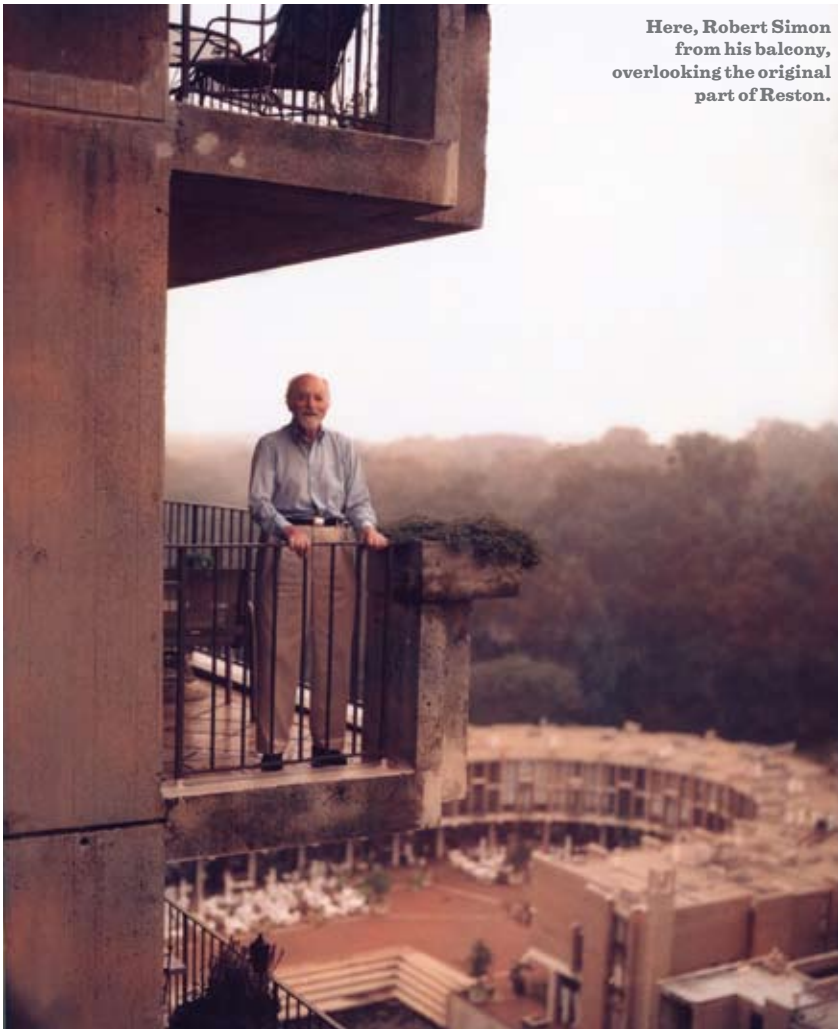
Just this year, Reston citizens and Fairfax County officials have been meeting regularly to figure ways to add life and development to the center of Reston, Lake Anne, without ruining its character. This June, the Reston Community Reinvestment Corporation held a planning charette to solicit ideas on how to accomplish this. Hovering above all of the discussion is Simon, who is as bright, polished and gracious as he was back in 1961 when he began his odyssey.

Reston today is a large, sprawling suburban city, best known for the urban-style Reston Town Center, a high-density mixed-use mall and office development. But just off Route 7, Leesburg Pike, is the original part of Reston, looking remarkably similar to those oft-seen pictures from the 1970s. Surrounding a lake are condos, a public square and a tower. With inspiration taken from European lake villages, the first floors were meant to have retail. Today, many of these are lower-intensity uses—while Lake Anne is by no means ailing, the population density within walking distance was never enough to make the retail take off.

While Reston seemed a bold stroke, even for the sort of person who might own Carnegie Hall, from his early days Simon was involved with the idea of planning cities. "I had done other things on a much smaller scale," he says. Indeed, it seems as if Simon was at the nexus of 20th-century urban planning as his father was on the

This page, Simon at his condo overlooking Reston. Facing page, Lake Anne and the statue of Robert Simon that watches over the plaza.





Here, Robert Simon from his balcony, overlooking the original part of Reston.

board of Radburn, the Fair Lawn, N.J. town celebrated for being one of the first to separate walking paths from roads. “We heard about that at the breakfast table,” says Simon, who is not, by the way, the Simon of Indiana-based Simon Property malls. But, coincidentally, one of Robert Simon’s early projects was a development with Austrian-born Victor Gruen, who is considered to be the father of the enclosed American mall. “He was absolutely reconciled to the automobile,” says Simon, who credits Gruen with not only the mall, but also the attempts to revive downtowns with malls.

Today, as it is built, Reston seems slightly typical as many others have copied it, but it was a big step above the typical strip mall of the 1960s, and each village was thought through completely. Cars were separated from pedestrians. Lawns were frowned upon in favor of woodlands. Modern architects were favored over colonial. Income levels were varied. Townhomes came before single-family houses. And, even more bold, the community was integrated, with some uncomfortable with the “token integration” at Reston and others even more uncomfortable with it being inte-

grated at all. Quite adeptly, Simon told *The Washington Star* in 1966 that what he offered was “freedom of choice.”

A variety of architects and planners were used, with inspiration taken from Europe. “We looked at what was terrific in a lot of parts of the world. We wanted to have a ‘there there’ here,” says Simon, echoing the old Gertrude Stein comment on Oakland (“There is no there, there.”). And Simon knew that rentals in the growing D.C. suburbs would work. “We knew it if we

got the rentals for enough, we could fill it up,” he says. While the idea seemed revolutionary then—to put suburban townhouses on top of stores—Simon is insistent that it was not revolutionary, just a reinvention of what had come before. Indeed, many of the early developments look like something out of an Italian lake village. “There is nothing new,” says Simon.

While the property was half the size of Manhattan, Simon got

as good as the Dutch got for New Amsterdam. He bought the property for \$12,800,000, with \$800,000 cash. Early financing for Reston was difficult; Simon credits the old State Planters Bank (now SunTrust) with lending for the original houses when few others would. “They would give us loans for the original pieces.” But as the project grew, Simon needed more capital and brought in Gulf Oil. Eventually it was too capital-intensive a project for Gulf, and they pushed him out.

In the interim, because everything was new, everything was tried—a pioneer spirit. “We would put something out there and see what it would do. Up popped community centers, art galleries and day care centers. Residents subsidized a commuter bus into D.C.; on the way in, there were doughnuts, and cocktails on the way home. There was even a coffee shop. “We had two darling ladies—one still lives here—who started up a child care establishment in a room in a church,” says Simon.

Simon’s recollections are not just about the physical buildings and landscape; one of his favorite memories is a play, *The Greatest Game in Town*, that the Reston Players put on. “I was sitting in my office one day,” he says. “This guy came in.” He wanted to borrow the riding ring, part of what Simon calls Reston’s “do it yourself” stable. “In those days it was horse country.”

Typically of his inventive spirit, Simon agreed. “Instead of doing *Our Town*, something safe, they were going to do an original play,” he recalls. “To make matters worse, an original musical.” With a population of only 400, organizers raised a huge amount of money, \$5,000, and involved 25 percent of the population. “They asked what did she do—

says Simon. “I would come down once a year.” When he did, he says, the Reston folks would “wave him around like a flag.” But after retiring, he felt more or less isolated in a place where he could not walk to the store. Twelve years ago, Simon came back.

Today, Simon is thinking of the future of Reston amidst changing retail trends. “This was built around a supermarket,” he says, gesturing down to the retail village on Lake Anne. But now, supermarkets have larger square footage and cannot fit at Lake Anne. Many of those original amenities have moved out; for instance, the convenience store across the parking lot is now a bodega. To help increase traffic, Simon is pushing for additional residential units and retail and office uses. The other problem is that the residents of the apartments around the lake, which went condo, now pay for the upkeep around the lake, while other housing units don’t. That means that residents such as Simon (who has an 1,800-square-foot apartment in the tower) pay \$20,000 in condo fees a year.

But the challenges are not insurmountable, and there is no shortage of goodwill. Indeed, there is a developing consensus that to keep the now historic heart of Reston vibrant, it needs to change. Fairfax County has included Lake Anne in a group of a half-dozen or so revitalization areas. At Lake Anne, a number of options are being floated. While it isn’t depressed, officials like Supervisor Cathy Hudgins want to make sure that what has been created is protected, what she calls retaining “that same sense of atmosphere, but to brush it up.” Hudgins, a longtime Reston resident, says it’s a thrill to have Simon be a part of it. “He’s full of ideas every day.”

Looking back, Simon’s bold plan, a

Cars were separated from pedestrians. Lawns were frowned upon in favor of woodlands. Modern architects were favored over colonial. Income levels were varied. Townhomes came before single-family houses.

she tap danced,” says Simon. They put her in, and sold 2,000 tickets.

But the real world intervened. Simon hit a cash crunch, and he was out, to return permanently a quarter-century later. While the development of Reston continued without him (Gulf was later replaced by Mobil), the town was never far away from his mind. “When I retired on Long Island, I had such a warm feeling for the people. ... I kept in touch here,”

plan that changed the look and identity of Northern Virginia and made architectural history in the process, seems obvious. Getting there was a lot harder. Through it all, Simon had the knowledge that whatever happened to the site came out of the geography and the growing metropolis surrounding it, and because of the place, it was bound to succeed.

“Here I was with this wonderful piece of property,” he says.

ON THE WEB: Want to learn more? George Mason University’s collection of Planned Community Archives has extensive history and information on Simon and the creation of Reston. Click on gmu.edu/library/specialcollections/simon1.html and the site includes original brochures, speeches and clippings, as well as information on the Robert E. Simon Jr. collection. Curious about how Reston works? Check out Reston.org, the Web site of the Reston Association.

AT LAKE ANNE: Last April, on Bob Simon’s birthday, the Reston Storefront Museum of Suburban History updated the history of the town with new exhibits and pictures. While the museum doesn’t keep daily hours, it is open most weekends at 1639 Washington Plaza. Information online at RestonMuseum.org includes a PDF of Robert Simon’s own copy of the Reston Master Plan.