

# Dan Rodricks: The Jim Rouse legacy is now a million affordable homes | STAFF COMMENTARY



In 1993, The Sun recognized developer James W. Rouse as Marylander of the Year for the work of his Enterprise Foundation. “He makes people believe. He lends his credibility and contacts and ideas. For lack of a better label, he is called a visionary.”



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When James Rouse died at 81 in 1996, The Baltimore Sun’s obituary described him as “the developer and social architect who turned idealism into bricks, mortar and profit with projects as diverse as Harborplace, Charles Center and Columbia.”

Twenty-eight years later, that probably holds up, in the public mind, as the Rouse legacy.

But one of his achievements — from Rouse’s years in retirement and not from his career as a builder of suburban malls and urban markets — could rightfully be declared his greatest.

In 1982, Rouse and his wife, Patty, [established the Enterprise Foundation](#) with a \$1 million donation, taking on the high-minded goal of providing decent, affordable housing for every American, no matter how poor.

It sounded totally unrealistic, of course, but it was typical of Rouse's thinking: "Dream wildly because feasibility will compromise you soon enough."

By now, Enterprise is one of the major nonprofit players in the affordable housing arena, but it has not yet reached Rouse's fabulous goal. There are millions of Americans still looking for a decent, affordable place to live. In fact, the nation is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis.

But attention must be paid (because we haven't been paying attention for a while): The organization the Rouses established 42 years ago has so far provided [1 million homes in all 50 states](#) plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. That, says Enterprise, represents \$72 billion in investments in apartments and houses, either created or preserved, through hundreds of partnerships with community organizations, churches, financial institutions, developers and other nonprofits.

Until I heard about the million-homes milestone, I had no appreciation for the scale of the James Rouse legacy.

"Enterprise is in some ways bigger than anything else he did," says Shaun Donovan, president and CEO of Enterprise Community Partners, as the Columbia-based organization is now known. "We're putting out over \$10 billion a year through Enterprise. We're the biggest non-profit owner and manager of housing [in the Mid-Atlantic], and we're the biggest policy and advocacy organization in affordable housing in the country."

Enterprise hit the million-homes mark in late 2023, but [celebrated the achievement in Columbia](#) last month at the opening of the Legacy at Twin Rivers. That's two four-story buildings with 153 new apartments that replaced the original 53-unit Twin Rivers site.

Enterprise's investment in the Rouses' home state is substantial, at about \$3.3 billion, accounting for the creation or preservation of about 43,000 Maryland domiciles.

Baltimore has received about a third of that, with [Sandtown-Winchester](#), in West Baltimore, being Enterprise's best-known city development. That effort, with 200 new homes constructed in the 1990s, demonstrated the need for a coordinated, comprehensive approach to urban poverty and neighborhood transformation — better and more affordable housing, public transportation, health services, jobs and improved schools.

Problems, many of the generational, persist, and some scoff at the project as a failure. I've always viewed it as a missed opportunity for others — particularly the growing numbers of millionaires and billionaires living in this country — to build on what Rouse started.

You'd think more of the super-wealthy would want to establish a legacy like the Rouses' by writing large checks to nonprofits, like Enterprise, that have a long track record of coordinating tax credits and other financing necessary to create modest homes for people with modest incomes. It's why I've [implored Michael Bloomberg](#) (net worth now \$106.2 billion, according to Forbes) to designate \$1 billion over 10 years for Baltimore Community Lending, a federally certified Community Development Financial Institution, for the conversion of vacant rowhouses into new affordable homes. (I first made that pitch when Bloomberg's net worth was only \$59 billion.) Nationwide, the shortage in affordable homes — and the demand for new housing in general — is huge. The Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, or Freddie Mac, puts the [current shortfall at 3.8 million homes](#); other estimates are higher. The shortage contributes directly to rising home prices. And, in many suburban areas — [yes, right here, near Baltimore](#) — there's still community resistance to new, high-density development. Plus, restrictive zoning laws make building apartments difficult, a factor in the housing shortage and rising rents.

“One of the things we're working on nationally,” says Donovan, “is to build more of a movement, especially at the state and local level, a ‘Yes, in my backyard’ movement that really encourages more housing and more housing density.”

Enterprise's Columbia project is all about tackling the shortage while fostering diverse communities. In addition to the Legacy at Twin Rivers, the nonprofit is redeveloping four old Columbia sites, doubling the number of homes in them and offering rents at three income levels.

“The buildings are now being completely rebuilt, denser, with more housing because we've got a huge shortage,” says Donovan. “People think about Columbia as Jim Rouse's legacy; they think about the Inner Harbor and the festival marketplace [concept]. But, if you put those million homes together, you're talking about one of the biggest cities in the country, right? And so, when you think about this place that Jim Rouse built, millions and millions of families have benefited over the years.”

Call it the House of Rouse, spreading from Massachusetts to Oregon, from Alaska to the Virgin Islands.

Coda: If current plans for its redevelopment move forward, Jim Rouse's Harborplace might soon disappear from the Baltimore waterfront. But, given the achievements of the nonprofit that he and his wife established, I'd say the Rouse legacy is sound.



Shaun Donovan, the president and CEO of Enterprise Community Partners, addresses people who gathered in Columbia in April for the opening of the Legacy at Twin Rivers.