

**James Rouse,
John Levering
and Wes Yamaka**

drawing connections

“If we were really trying to create inspired, concerned and loving people, might not this begin to influence the kind of plans we would unfold and might it not point the way to answers we are not now perceiving?”

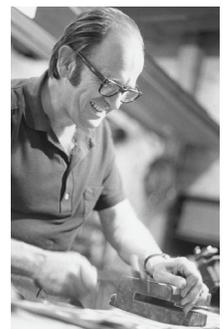
Columbia founder, James Rouse, put forth this challenge in 1963. The answer to his own question is the vision of Columbia. “I believe the most successful community would be that which contributed the most by its physical form, its institutions, and its operation to the growth of people. An inspired and concerned society will dignify man; will find ways to develop his talents,”¹ he asserted.

In 1971, eight years after Rouse presented his challenge and four years after Columbia

welcomed its first residents, John Levering and Wes Yamaka opened an art studio called Eye of the Camel. Their story says a lot about Columbia.

Columbia was designed to be a place that would give people the opportunity to grow and these men personified this goal.

Columbia was a small town with big plans in 1971. About 17,000 people lived in the villages of Wilde Lake, Harper's Choice and Oakland Mills. Most of the new town's residents had been attracted to this community because of its lofty vision and many were working to create the institutions and organizations
continued on other side



to achieve the goal and the environment for people to flourish. Columbia was “The Next America” according to the sign at the Exhibit Center.

Nationally, the war in Vietnam raged on, marking the second decade of U.S. involvement. Antiwar protests in Washington drew hundreds of thousands. The voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 with the passage of the 26th Amendment. Apollo 15 astronauts bounced around the moon in a lunar dune buggy. The Baltimore Colts won the Super Bowl, the Baltimore Orioles lost the World Series to Pittsburgh and Washington’s baseball Senators left the Capital for Texas.

Levering came to Columbia and Howard Research and Development (HRD), the Columbia development subsidiary of The Rouse Company, in July 1967 as manager of Columbia Association, which at that time was controlled by HRD. He had been a vice president of Monumental Life Insurance Company. But James Rouse saw more in him than his financial acumen. In

introducing him to the community at a town meeting, Rouse said Levering’s “real concern was with people and community. He is an extremely wise, extremely gentle, extremely human fellow. He will be very sensitive to your needs and your yearnings and he will be the ideal person to make the Columbia Association an effective servant to this community.”²

In 1969, Levering moved into a newly created position of director of institutional relations for HRD but continued his involvement with CA as a director and chair of the CA executive committee. Two years later he made a major career change when he resigned from HRD to pursue his art. In a newspaper article covering his departure Levering explained the transition, “One of the things so wrong with the lives we live is practicality. Our conventional application of practicality puts a terrific premium on security. You can get caught in the system and become utterly paralyzed.”³ Levering had grown, found ways to develop his talents, was inspired to follow his dream and in so doing lived Rouse’s vision.

Yamaka came to Columbia through a very different route, but one that ultimately led to his collaboration and friendship with Levering and Rouse.

Yamaka had been a Methodist minister on the West Coast and came to Columbia to be a part of

the newly formed ecumenical venture called Columbia Cooperative Ministry. Yamaka had been growing dissatisfied with the rigidity of church leaders. A new town exploring new ways to minister seemed a perfect fit. “The prospect of assessing what it means to be religious in a new city was terribly exciting,”⁴ Yamaka told *Columbia Magazine* in 1989, reflecting on his life in Columbia.

The early years of Columbia Cooperative Ministry were exciting as it broke new ground and helped with the formation of new congregations. One of those new congregations was Kittamaquidi Community. Levering, Jim Rouse and his first wife, Libby, were founding members of this church.

In 1970, Yamaka left CCM to become a writer for The Rouse Company. A year later he made his third career change. Years later Yamaka reflected, “Only in Columbia would I have the opportunity to learn eight or nine different jobs.”⁵

Yamaka and Levering shared a love for people, for art and for ministry. Their collaboration in the Eye of the Camel brought all of that together.

Yamaka did graphic, poster-like silk screens in vibrant primary colors offset by poignant quotes culled from philosophers, poets, writers and religious works. His spirituality was integral to his art. Levering’s work included woodcuts, watercolors, drawings and metal sculpture. A 3-foot walnut relief depicting the life of Benjamin Banneker still hangs in the Howard County’s George Howard Building. **The variety and scope of the studio’s presentations reflected the artists’ commitment to social, ecumenical and ecological concerns.**

The two continued to work out of the Eye of the Camel until 1977. After that they each continued to pursue their art and their spiritual growth. In 1979, Yamaka returned to California and the Methodist church, made a return to Columbia in the 1980s and then settled in Oregon. He died in 2015. John Levering operated art studios locally until 1986, when he moved to Washington to become dean of the Servant Leadership School at the Church of the Savior. He died in 1989.

¹ James Rouse, *It Can Happen Here, Conference on the Metropolitan Future, University of California at Berkeley, September 23, 1963*

² James Rouse at Town Meeting, October 8, 1967

³ Ed Price, *Levering Leaves to Try Art, Central Maryland News Columbian, Vol. 4, No.13, April 22, 1971*

⁴ Hollis Paschen, *The Nine Lives of Wes Yamaka, Columbia Magazine, Fall 1989*

⁵ *ibid*

