A Milestone Event On The West Coast:
Habitat ’76 Thirty-Five Years On

by Don Alexander, MCIP

NOTE: This article relies heavily on research conducted by Vancouver writer, artist and activist Lindsay Brown. For more information, see the end of the article.

Thirty-five years ago, an event occurred in Vancouver that would change the face of urban policy worldwide, and yet most planners know little about it. Until recently, I would count myself amongst them. The conference was Habitat ’76, usually known as Habitat I in light of the fact that it was followed by Habitat II in Istanbul in 1996, the World Urban Forum (3) in Vancouver in 2006, and the World Urban Forum (4) in Nanjing in 2008.

Habitat I was actually two conferences. The first, ‘official’, conference – the UN-Habitat Conference on Human Settlements – was held under tight security at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and other venues downtown. The second, the Habitat Forum, attended by citizens and non-government organizations (NGOs), was held in five repurposed aircraft hangars at the former army/ navy base at Jericho Beach Park. This people’s forum, consisted of displays on urban and architectural themes, information booths/ literature tables, lectures, public forums, performances, and the world’s longest stand-up bar. Those who attended have described it as having been a “giant party.”

Featured speakers included Buckminster Fuller, Paolo Soleri of Arcosanti fame, Barbara Ward, Margaret Mead, Mother Theresa, and the Trudeaus, amongst others. Even many ‘official’ delegates attended as it was seen as where the ‘real action’ was occurring, and where they could mingle with citizens and NGOs. To Pierre Trudeau’s and the UN organizers’ dismay, the main conference was hijacked by a political fight between supporters of the Palestine Liberation Organization and those of Israel, which distracted attention away from the main intended topics: the burning need for provision of clean water and other urban infrastructure, the need for decent shelter, urban energy and waste issues, and other problems associated with human settlement and rapid urban growth, particularly in developing countries.

The conference and the forum were in many ways outgrowths of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm.1 At that conference, two things became evident – that it was essential to consider cities and the environment through a common lens, and that NGOs and citizens needed to be better represented at such global events.

The Canadian government offered to host Habitat ’76, the largest UN conference to date, and – through Trudeau’s personal intervention – the conference was pressed on a reluctant Vancouver. The federal government provided approximately $11 million in total funding, with $1 million going to the forum itself, much of it in job training grants. Trudeau saw the importance of the issues that the conference intended to address, and perhaps was additionally motivated by the energy crisis, then at its peak, given how central cities were and are from an energy consumption perspective.

Despite having a progressive City Council and civic administration at the time, the City’s response was lukewarm at best. There was undoubtedly concern about the potential security threats, and associated costs, associated with the official conference. In addition, the Park Board, under conservative leadership, didn’t take kindly to the organizers of the forum (who were perceived as a “bunch of hippies”) taking over a major West Side park.

The choice of a specific location for Habitat Forum was engineered by CTV news show host, Al Clapp, who had a passion for saving old industrial buildings, particularly for use by artists. Clapp and his colleagues noted the similarity in form between the hangars and traditional West Coast longhouses. Clapp traded on his connections with both Trudeau and Dave Barrett, NDP premier of the province at the time, to have Jericho Park and the hangars selected as the site for the forum.

Once secured, they solicited the assistance of many architects, artists and others, and convinced Bill Reid, prominent Haida artist, to do a mural on the outside of the theatre hangar intended for performances, and to create a design for a banner developed by fabric artist, Evelyn Roth, and her team to hang from the ceiling of the inside of the Plenary Hall. As author/activist Rex Weyler remembers, “Al was paying nearly every

(continued next page)
Habitat (cont’d)

hippie carpenter on the coast” to retrofit the buildings. In a move that was way ahead of its time, the builders relied on salvage logs (including from Jericho Beach) that they milled on site using a portable mill supplied by Dave Barrett.

In all, there were five buildings: the main hall, exhibit hall, the plenary hall, the social centre (including the bar), and the theatre workshop building. What is now the Jericho Sailing Club served as the press centre. Pat Canning remembers: “The buildings were quite lovely – breathing, shaking slightly in the wind off the bay, animated with our ideas and excitement.” Though artists were allowed to use one of the buildings for a few years after the conference, the Park Board ordered the demolition of the hangars in 1980, including Bill Reid’s mural, in what can only be described as a deliberate act of civic vandalism.

After the forum, artists had envisioned the buildings’ ongoing use as a venue for an artists’ community. However, the Park Board at the time cited liability issues. The Park Board was fearful those structures would become desirable places to conduct activities of which they disapproved.

What Was the Significance of Habitat I?

At the time of the conference, when two-thirds of the world’s population was still living in rural areas, and issues of rural development remained a predominant focus, the UN had no agency addressing the problems of human settlement and urbanization. However, as Barbara Ward presciently wrote at the time: “mankind is engaged in a kind of race for survival, between the inner and outer boundaries of social pressures and physical constraints, while the doubling of population [also noted by Trudeau in his speech] and emerging of a half-urban world takes place. These overlapping contexts of violent demographic, social, and environmental change all meet – one could say collide – in human settlements.” As a result of the event and its proclamation, the Vancouver Declaration, the UN Habitat agency was established in 1978.

Outside of the establishment of the UN agency, a major accomplishment, the conference’s international and national impact is harder to gauge. The University of British Columbia’s Centre for Human Settlements was established as a direct legacy of the conference under the guiding hand of Peter Oberlander, who was also a major participant in Habitat I and subsequent UN-Habitat conferences. Another effect may have been felt through a walking tour conducted by Hayne Wai, as a representative of the Strathcona neighbourhood, who took delegates through the community to highlight the Strathcona Rehabilitation Project, a prototype for the federal Neighbourhood Improvement Program (NIP) and Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP). Local activists were encouraged by the praise they received from delegates for their pioneering work that sought an alternative to the wholesale demolition of communities through “urban renewal.”

Locally, the City of Vancouver, through social planner Ernie Fladell, organized Festival Habitat, a performing arts event to occur as part of the festivities. The flourishing of the arts at the forum has been described by Rex Weyler as a “mini-Renaissance.” Country Joe MacDonald (of Country Joe and the Fish fame) was one of the performers. The festival was enormously popular, and the unexpected surplus of $40,000 provided the means to initiate an ongoing, though short-lived, Heritage Festival, which in turn spawned the Vancouver Folk Festival, and the Vancouver Children’s Festival, both of which are still going strong.

However, in other respects, Habitat I, especially the forum’s, impact seems to have been rather muted. Lindsay Brown speculates that this may have been for a number of reasons. First, in addition to the dozens of individuals who received job training working on the Forum, it also required the volunteer efforts of hundreds of organizers to pull it off. They worked extremely hard, and the result was massive burnout. Secondly, while the “sixties” began later in Vancouver and lasted longer than elsewhere, 1976 was its last gasp in many ways.

A peak year in the redevelopment of the visionary Vancouver neighbourhood of South False Creek, and in the construction of housing co-ops, 1976 also saw the re-emergence of the right-of-centre Non-Partisan Association (NPA) as a major force on Vancouver city council, with NPA gaining an absolute majority in 1978. In addition, the Social Credit Party, under Bill Bennett, recaptured the provincial government in 1975 from the NDP, but after the arrangements for Habitat had been made, and the Socreds were to remain in power until 1991. Political and social conservatism became the order of the day. As Weyler says, there was a “backlash” against the counter-culture, and the demolition of the forum structures left artists and activists “heartbroken.” With the buildings having been demolished, there was no physical focus for remembrance.

But another issue lacking clarity is why the impact of the conference seems to have had a relatively small impact on planners, despite its obvious relevance. If its influence was limited, the partial stillbirth of the main conference may have been one factor, but another may have been the relative parochialism of North American planners who had not, with notable exceptions, taken seriously problems of ‘Third World’ urbanization or seen them as having much relevance to North American conditions. If true, this is somewhat ironic in that we now pay hom-
Habitat (cont’d)

age to the revolutionary work of Enrique Peñalosa in Bogotá and Jaime Lerner in Curitiba, where much policy and on-the-ground planning surpasses our own. In fact, Peñalosa’s father, who was the UN’s representative to the conference, gave by all accounts a stirring speech to the assembled delegates, noting that, in his country, 90% of all housing was constructed, not by the government or by the private sector, but by the poor themselves – often against the law.

Just as the ‘two solitudes’ of environment and social justice, so much in evidence at the Stockholm conference, are only finally being breached after many decades, so too are the experiences and realms of the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world. Fortunately, the planning community was well-represented at the World Urban Forum in Vancouver in 2006, which was held in tandem with the World Planners’ Congress just a block away.

While Habitat ’76 has been forgotten by many, this urban amnesia need not remain a permanent condition. To further awareness of the Habitat Forum in particular, Lindsay Brown has established a web site with articles, news of activities, and video clips [see http://habitat76.ca], and is preparing a book to analyze and commemorate the event. If you would like more information, please contact her at: habitatforum76@gmail.com.

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1 Barbara Ward was a guiding light for the Stockholm conference through her book (with René Dubos), Only One Earth: The Care and Maintenance of a Small Planet, which was commissioned by Maurice Strong, secretary-general for the conference. The now deceased urbanist and development economist, has largely been forgotten by the planning community. However, she also wrote The Home of Man which was the keynote document for the delegates at Habitat I.

2 The day after the end of the conference, Greenpeace launched its second anti-whaling campaign from the Jericho wharf, with the Habitat buildings as a backdrop.

3 Though most of the arrangements had already been made, Bennett remained supportive and provided funds for a film about the Forum, as well as helping to secure liability insurance.