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URBAN AMNESIA

The Fate of Habitat '76

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PHOTO: Screen shot of sculpture in front of theatre hangar with Bill Reid mural. (collection of Al Clapp/Lindsay Brown.)
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 in Vancouver in 2006 (3), 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 in Vancouver’s downtown core. The second, the Habitat Forum attended by citizens and non-government organizations, was held in five repurposed aircraft hangars at a former army/navy base on the city’s west side. The conference seems to have had a relatively small impact on planners. It’s possible that the problems of ‘Third World’ urbanization were seen as not having much relevance to North American conditions. Just as the ‘two solitudes’ of environment and social justice are only finally being breached after many decades, so too are the experiences and realms of the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world.

This fracas distracted attention 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 the developing world.

The conference and the forum were in many ways outgrowths of the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. At that conference, two things became evident—that it was essential to view cities and the environment through a common lens, and that the NGO and citizen sectors 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 Pierre Trudeau’s personal intervention—Vancouver was chosen as the host city. 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 and forum

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.
"Human settlements are so closely linked to existence itself, represent such a widespread and concrete reality, are so complex and demanding, are so laden with questions of rights and desires, with needs and aspirations, so racked with injustices and inefficiencies, that the subject cannot be approached with the leisurely detachment of the solitary theoretician.... For it is a question of existence, and existence is not...something that waits for the future. It is a question of the here and now.... Over the centuries, man has created wonderful structures and numerous architectural monuments in which to house himself. Yet, in all too many instances, the appearance of his dwellings and the conditions within them are deplorable. And they are inhuman when measured against our universal ideals." —EXCERPT FROM PRIME MINISTER PIERRE TRUDEAU'S ADDRESS TO THE 1976 UN-HABITAT CONFERENCE.

were 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.

The choice of a specific location for Habitat Forum was recommended by CTV news show host, Al Clapp, who had a passion for saving old industrial buildings, principally 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, New Democratic Party (NDP) premier at the time, to have Jericho Park and the hangars selected as the site for the forum.

Once the site was secured, the assistance of many architects, artists and others was solicited, and Bill Reid, prominent Haida artist, was convinced to create a mural on the outside of the theatre hangar intended for performances. He was also requested to produce a design for a banner developed by fabric artist Evelyn Roth and her team, to be hung from the ceiling inside the Plenary Hall.

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. Although the city allowed artists 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.

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, though it remains badly underfunded.

Outside of the establishment of the UN agency, 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.

“One of the most encouraging things of the ’70s is the way in which the whole human family has started to talk about the basic elements of its daily life. For instance, the needs of its citizens—food, population, the status of women—all beginning from the Stockholm [conference] realization that we belong to a single planet and, however much we may think of ourselves as politically separate, in the most profound sense of sharing in all the great life support systems we are inescapably one. In a sense, we are in the middle of one of the vast historical changes in the human condition which, if we grasp it, we can hope to guide.”—EXCERPT FROM BARBARA WARD’S ADDRESS TO THE 1976 UN-HABITAT CONFERENCE.

However, in other respects, the impacts of Habitat I—especially the forum—were rather muted. Writer and activist 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 by working on the Forum, it also required the efforts of hundreds of volunteers, including children, 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 development of the visionary Vancouver neighbourhood, 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, and the Socreds were to remain in power until 1991. Political and social conservatism became the order of the day. In addition, with the buildings having been demolished, there was no physical focus for remembrance in later years.

Yet another issue lacking clarity is why 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 factor may have been the relative parochialism of North American planners who had not, with notable exceptions, taken the problems of ‘Third World’ urbanization seriously or perceived them as having much relevance to North American conditions. If true, this is somewhat ironic as we now pay homage 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, by all accounts gave 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 penetrated 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, held in tandem with the World Planners’ Congress just a block away.

This urban amnesia need not remain a permanent condition. To further awareness of the Habitat Forum in particular, Lindsay Brown has established a website 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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REFERENCES AND NOTES
1. Barbara Ward was a guiding light for the Stockholm conference through her book (with Renée 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. She also wrote The Home of Man, which was the keynote document for the delegates at Habitat I.
2. 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.
3. I freely admit this is speculation on my part.