

COMMENTS ON HABITAT FORUM

Marjorie Inman
Purdue University

It was a far cry from a World's Fair or the Olympics. In fact, in the early morning hours on a gray day, its emptiness reminded one of a county fair that was not yet ready to open. Soon after nine o'clock, however, people would begin moving about, and another conference day would be underway for the Habitat Forum.

Habitat, the official United Nations Conference on Human Settlements was held in Vancouver, British Columbia from May 27 through June 11. It was paralleled by a non-official conference called Habitat Forum, in which both professional and non-professional persons from the world over were invited to participate.

According to the United Nations General Assembly, the main purpose of Habitat was "to serve as a practical means to exchange information about solutions to problems of human settlements against a broad background of environmental and other concerns..." These problems cannot be separated from the social and economic conditions under which they exist.

The official UN conference was held in downtown Vancouver. However, to provide enough space for more than 150 countries and 5000 persons at the Forum, an old air force base at Jericho Beach was renovated. This was the first time that a non-governmental meeting associated with a major UN conference prepared its own site. Even

then, Canada estimated its costs for both conferences to be at least 15 million dollars. In order to prepare the site, a sawmill erected on the beach was used to cut over 450,000 board feet of lumber from logs and driftwood found on the shore. From the lumber a theater, two auxiliary stages, bleachers, one of the longest bars in the world, restaurants, covered walkways, and outdoor patio areas were constructed. Five air force hangars were converted into 15 meeting rooms, offices, and over 60 display areas. Outside exhibits were composed of various examples of low-cost housing, which could be used in either disaster or needy areas.

The final setting for Habitat Forum was far from one of refinement, although space was adequate for most of the programs. Construction seemed to continue on during most of the conference...it appeared that time and money had not been adequate to prepare for such a large group of participants. One had the general feeling that part of the overall plan for the conference was to provide the attendees with experiences pertaining to many of the world's living conditions, while they were gathered together in one small area of the globe—Vancouver. Buildings were cold, damp, and drafty. Crude wood bleachers served as seats. Foods from the world over were available and were eaten from either a standing

position or on rough wooden benches. Blankets were distributed to provide warmth as temperatures the first week hovered around 55°F. A few flowers were provided in the landscaping, but the majority of the exterior area was mud, straw, and gravel. Crude, but adequate washroom facilities were provided. The general setting gave participants much room for thought. Overall, however, the basic human needs were provided for, and special consideration for the handicapped had been made. Participants were even given the opportunity to hear key-note speakers in their choice of English, French, or Spanish.

Various world leaders concerned with the environment such as Margaret Mead, Jorge Hardoy, Barbara Ward, Paul Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Maurice Strong, Clare Cooper, and Buckminster Fuller highlighted the conference with their presentations during the main sessions. At least fifty different meetings, workshops, speeches, panels, and papers were presented each day. All were concerned with one or more of nine basic themes...

- ...National human settlement policies.
- ...Participation in planning and implementation.
- ...Human settlements and the new international economic order.
- ...Rural settlements.
- ...Community involvement in improving the quality of life.
- ...Land use and ownership.
- ...User-oriented human settlement technologies.
- ...Man-made and natural environment.
- ...Social justice and the question of differing cultures and values.

This conference was very worthwhile in theme, in idea, and most of all in the experience it afforded to the many participants from the world over. Most thought provoking of all was the interplay of various nationalities, representing well over 150 countries, sharing ideas together in a single group, convening together for a single purpose...to study human settlements, their physical, economic, sociological, and psychological needs.