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Habitat: A Festive Air, Serious Business

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A festive air surrounded the serious business of Habitat, the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements held 27 May to 11 June in Vancouver, British Columbia.

On the Sunday before the conference opened, Margaret Mead, carrying her forked walking stick, and a Canadian Indian chief, carrying a ceremonial "talking stick," led the opening procession of an interfaith Habitat liturgy. For the 12 days following, there were films, displays of new technologies, mobile workshops, daily international arts performances, and the sober task of studying the problems and possibilities of human living communities.

Some 930 delegates representing 132 nations met to act on the recommendations which had been prepared in advance by the U. N. Habitat Secretariat. In plenary sessions and in three committees they examined and modified the U.N. documents. The final products of their work were a declaration of principles and documents making recommendations for national action and international cooperation.

Heading the U.S. delegation were Carla Hills, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Russell Peterson, chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality.

Two complementary gatherings paralleling the official U.N. Conference were the Habitat Forum—a conference of nongovernmental

organizations and the Vancouver Symposium—a closed conference of 24 scientists, planners, and humanists.

The forum was housed on Jericho Beach, 4 miles from downtown Vancouver, in several abandoned airplane hangars that had been remodeled by local volunteers using only recycled materials. It hosted displays, presentations, and meetings of conservationists, community activists, artists, alternate and "appropriate" technology advocates, and political and religious groups. Margaret Mead and Buckminster Fuller were among the speakers on a program that included theatrical presentations by folk artists of several countries and an open debate on nuclear energy. Some 2400 representatives from 56 countries, as well as several thousand local and international visitors, took part in forum discussions that led to the preparation of statements distributed through official channels to the U.N. delegates. The Habitat Forum expects to publish these documents this fall.

Forum participants broke down the broad Habitat topics of national settlement policies and strategies into questions of shelter, services, and public participating in decision-making. Discussion of self-help housing, global population issues, technology gathering, women and settlements, water supply, and nuclear and solar energy use occupied much of the forum's time, but the program also branched out into esthetics and philosophy, in such sessions as "The Arts and Human Settlements," and "Social Justice and Human Settlement Policy."

Despite a steady flow of delegates between the official conference site and the forum, communication between the two areas was not as strong as many had hoped. Although Carla Hills and other national representatives were visible at various forum discussions, scheduling and transportation problems sometimes precluded active participation in both the U.N. Conference and the Habitat Forum.

The third component of Habitat, the Vancouver Symposium, convened prior to the official conference to prepare a set of recommendations for the U.N. delegates. The symposium was sponsored by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the National Audubon Society, and the Population Institute. Among the 24 symposium participants were Mead, Fuller, Barbara Ward, president of IIED, and Maurice Strong, former secretary-general of the U.N. Conference on the Human Environment.

With Ward serving as rapporteur, the symposium produced a declaration calling for increased attention to water and nuclear power problems and affirming that "mankind does not lack human and physical resources to create and regenerate truly communities."

One innovative communication technique at the Habitat Conference was the use of visual materials to portray living conditions all over the world. Each country prepared two or more documentary films to communicate selected problems and solutions, clips of which were used by delegates in the plenary meetings to illustrate their points. Some 250 films were available for viewing in a video center, which was open 16 hours a day. Regular showings of the films were scheduled in various conference locations, and a video tape system made it possible for official representatives to see any film at any time by simply requesting that it be shown.

If the Habitat Forum and the Vancouver Symposium did not have direct political influence on the U.N. Conference, they nevertheless acted as a significant force in giving wider scope to the U.N. endeavor. It was this breadth of participation that enabled the conference to accomplish its mission: The establishment of human settlement issues as national priorities for the world's countries.

Habitat participants representing governmental and other policy and action groups are now left with the task of up-grading human settlements to meet human needs. An important role for people in the sciences and the humanities, working jointly, will be to provide technical aid and clarification of values in order to promote favorable national and international will to deal humanely with habitat problems.