

Jericho conference realized the future

In our obsession with anniversaries, perhaps it's not surprising that the media should be replete with reminiscence about the importance of Expo '86 in the cultural evolution of Vancouver.

But think back to before the pavilions went up on False Creek.

Perhaps the real genesis of this city's transformation from parochial garrison to out-going metropolis occurred not at the world's fair but on the grass at Jericho Park in 1976.

It was there, at the margins of the first United Nations conference on human settlements, that unofficial delegates from non-governmental organizations gathered to discuss, debate, fulminate and cross-pollinate.

Darshan Johal, who now heads up the International Centre for Sustainable Cities, had — his word, not mine — “foolishly” joined the UN for one year that turned into 30 years away from his native Vancouver.

He remembers being seconded from the UN to prepare the substantive documentation for a conference intended to grapple with the explosive global growth in urban populations.

Habitat I was to focus the attention of the international community on the role of unplanned urbanization in the decline of living conditions, particularly in developing countries.

Johal's job was to get out and sell the Vancouver conference to world leaders as a forum in which the consequences of urbanization could be considered and ameliorated.

The task proved easier in Africa and Asia than here at home.

Then-Social Credit cabinet minister Hugh Curtis recognized the future significance for Vancouver, but Johal recalls that “the city was lukewarm.”

Architect Arthur Erickson, whose own hand in the transformation of the city's urban landscape has not been insignificant, is less charitable to the rest of us.



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welcome the delegates — nothing. So I sent a blanket invitation to them all to come to a reception at my house, which was far too small.”

Among those who showed up was futurist Buckminster Fuller.

It was delegates like these who made the NGO sideshow at Jericho Park into a powerful and profound turning point in Vancouver's psychic history.

“You have to remember that in 1976 we were in the middle of the Cold War,” Patsey George points out.

“There was a great deal of security and apprehension. A lot of us who were citizens of Vancouver couldn't get near the conference downtown. But at the Jericho NGO site we got close to international thinkers — Margaret Mead, Mother Theresa — and they made us think about our role as citizens in the global village.

“That was a moment of transformation, the awareness that community was no longer local, it was worldwide. And we were citizens of both.”

Erickson agrees with that assessment.

“Psychologically this was the beginning of an awareness of possibilities beyond the horizon. More importantly for Vancouver, the city was put on the map.”

In that sense, Habitat I was what made Expo '86 possible.

Meanwhile, the problems envisaged at Habitat I have come true with a vengeance. Twenty years ago, most of the world was rural. Ten years from now, most of the world will be urban

and the landscape will be transfigured by the emerging super city.

“The problem with Vancouver at the time was that its typically insular attitude prevailed,” Erickson recalls.

“I was discouraged that the city did nothing to

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There will be at least 22 cities with populations of 25 million or more, cities bigger than nation states and in many ways able and prepared to operate as sovereign nations.

Los Angeles already engages in its own relations with Japan.

But super cities generate super problems. They grow too fast to build the systems and infrastructure necessary to function as livable communities. They pollute on an immense scale. They deplete the resources of vast, subservient hinterlands.

So the UN is convening Habitat II, this time in Istanbul, and those who were changed forever in 1976 are invited to meet again at a special national forum in Vancouver on May 25.

It will provide an opportunity for Canadian organizations and individuals to bring forward issues of urban living in the 21st Century, explore possible solutions and shape a message for the 1996 conference in Turkey.

Speaking of improving the quality of urban life, tomorrow is Mother's Day and I'd be remiss if I didn't draw attention to the efforts of Louise Thomson and Mabel Nipshank at the YWCA's Crabtree Corner in the Downtown Eastside.

By way of demonstrating that their community is far more than the stereotyped Hell's Kitchen of prostitutes and junkies, they mobilized Eastside merchants to support a “pampering day” for 45 impoverished mothers who get precious little of it.

On Friday, the moms had breakfast, then their hair done, make overs, massages, manicures and a luncheon prepared by students at Vancouver City College. A small event in the global village, but the kind of thing from which enduring communities are made.