

WUF/NFB-HABITAT LEGACY PROJECT
PROJECT DOCUMENT
Revised – April 3/07

Introduction

Thirty-one years ago, in connection with the 1976 UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat), a massive and unique body of audio-visual material was produced whereby national governments and the civil society could bear witness to the state of human settlements around the world and learn what each country and its peoples were doing, or hoping to do, about their respective HS issues and problems at that point in time. The conference Secretary-General, Enrique Penalosa, called it a “world-wide snapshot of human settlements at a single moment in time”. This achievement has never been repeated.

The material comprises three primary categories:

- 1) Approximately 240 films and slide shows produced by **120 national governments** for presentation at the formal, intergovernmental plenary meetings, the major working groups, the Presentation Centre and the Media Centre, all in downtown Vancouver;
- 2) $\frac{3}{4}$ " Umatic video recordings of the **speeches, ceremonies and proceedings** of the formal intergovernmental conference itself, i.e. **the plenary sessions at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and related events;**
- 3) Similar video recordings of the **presentations and discussions at the parallel (informal) NGO Forum, held at Jericho Beach, featuring an array of distinguished speakers**, including Buckminster Fuller, Margaret Mead and Barbara Ward. The “Habitat Forum” was considered at that time the most creative and high-profile NGO gathering in UN history.

Category 1) the national government presentations were produced as 16mm film or 35mm slides in different language versions (English, French, Spanish, Russian and Arabic). All were replicated in 16mm film for world-wide distribution through regional information offices, initially under the UN Audio Visual Centre for Human Settlements (Vision Habitat) headquartered at the University of British Columbia and subsequently the UNCHS, headquartered in Nairobi.

Categories 2) the official intergovernmental conference recordings and 3) the Jericho NGO activities, were recorded on $\frac{3}{4}$ " Umatic video tape. A virtually complete set of categories 2) and 3) has been kept on $\frac{3}{4}$ " Umatic video tape in the archives of the University of British Columbia. A comprehensive catalogue of this material is retained by the UBC Archives.

Today, more than thirty years later, Category 1) the national government presentations, is dispersed around the world. The locations and quality of the film prints and their original printing elements are unknown. Categories 2 and 3) the

¾" Umatic video tapes at the UBC archives have and will increasingly deteriorate; their present technical condition already precludes their use for anything other than in-house scholarly research, with no general educational, broadcast or Internet applications possible.

Proposal

It is proposed that a systematic effort be made to digitalize a significant portion of the surviving 1976 Habitat AV inventory, transferring it to digital video disc (DVD) or some other appropriate digital medium so as to secure its long-term availability world-wide to students, educators, professionals and researchers now and for future generations. Once digitalized, the material can be stored, catalogued, cross-referenced, searched, excerpted, edited, replicated and e-mailed with little if any loss in quality; none of this is possible now.

Approach

It would be unrealistic to attempt to digitalize all of the '76 Habitat AV material. Screening, evaluating and prioritizing it would be a huge and expensive task, impractical, in fact impossible. In any case, technical experts at the NFB have advised that the ¾" UMATIC (analog) material would not provide a suitable digital end-product, i.e. be of adequate technical quality for electronic (Internet) manipulation and subsequent digital replication.

Our intention therefore is to concentrate on preserving the 220 or so national government presentations which were produced in 16mm film and distributed subsequent to the '76 conference through the Habitat regional offices. This option would still require good quality 16mm film prints to use as masters for the digitalizing process. Where such prints are not available, original printing elements or inter-negatives would be needed from which the requisite prints can be made. Printing elements are the templates from which distribution prints are made, ad infinitum, and are usually carefully stored in environmentally controlled laboratories or film archives, often for decades.

The Challenge

In order to advance in any degree on this project, we must first determine the location and quality of the extant 16mm film prints and/or their printing materials. This is an absolutely necessary first step; without it we cannot even begin to determine the scope and feasibility of the project, much less estimate costs.

Up until up until at least 1986 and presumably into the early 1990s this film inventory was being managed and distributed by UNCHS regional information offices in Amman, Bangkok, Budapest, Geneva, Mexico City, Nairobi and Vancouver . Now it seems to have disappeared. Since the summer of 2006 (WUF III) the proponents of this project have queried UNCHS Nairobi (at least three times), all UNCHS liaison and information offices listed on the UNCHS website, as well as UNDPI and the UN Audio-Visual Resource Office in New York seeking

information on the Habitat AV inventory. A 14-page list of the titles of the films and their alpha numeric codes accompanied each query. Not a single response has been received.

Funding

Though the question may appear academic at this time it is important to note that the proponents do not presume funding from either UNCHS or the National Film Board of Canada. We are confident that if a feasible, well-defined and responsibly costed proposal is developed, other entities, some governmental, some non-governmental, both within and outside Canada will provide the necessary funding. This has been our premise since day one. But we can only advance in this regard if we can determine the whereabouts and status of the extant films and printing elements. And this, only UNCHS can do.

With adequate 16mm prints and/or printing elements in hand, the process of digitalizing, per se, is not that high, usually based on a per-hour (real time) rate. Once the master DVDs or digital tapes are available, copies may be made for a few dollars each. In the event, the data would be stored in computer hard-drives, and copies made as required. In terms of orders-of-magnitude, this would be a hundred-thousand dollar plus project.

Institutional Arrangements

Even at this preliminary stage, it is clear that the project requires an organization that has well-established technical, promotional, distribution and custodial capabilities. The National Film Board of Canada seems uniquely qualified in these areas. Furthermore it is a world-renowned public institution; it will not be perceived as exploiting this unique body of work, which was after all, essentially given to the world by the governments of the world.

The NFB was instrumental, to say the least, in the design and implementation the '76 Habitat AV program. The program would not have succeeded without the technical, production and personnel support of the NFB, before, during and for years following the '76 Habitat Conference. The NFB's commitment and contribution to the '76 conference was profound and sustaining. The fact that the National Film Board of Canada was undertaking the preservation of the '76 AV material would receive world-wide attention, and be of great interest to all those governments and NGOs who participated in the '76 conference and its successors including of course the World Urban Forums.

Looking to the Future

One of the objectives of the NFB-Habitat MOU was articulated at WUF III by then Film Commissioner Jacques Bensimon as "giving a voice to the voiceless", exemplified in stunning fashion at several of the NFB-organized WUF III workshops which presented situations where local people had been given video cameras

to record their problems, analyze them, propose and attempt solutions; all very much in the spirit of the '76 Habitat AV program.

The AV technology of today and the world-wide reach of the Internet make this process of peoples' participation, engagement of the informal sector, mobilization of local resources and transfer of technology much more accessible and affordable at the community level than it was thirty years ago. One can easily imagine a "YouTube" with a global reach featuring video produced by local people attempting to help each other help themselves.

Any attempt to evaluate success and progress or the lack of it – an absolute prerequisite for successful planning - requires bench-mark data. The 1976 Habitat AV material, particularly the national government submissions (including those of the industrialized nations), provides a unique opportunity to see where we were then in terms of our thinking, our presumptions, our approaches with regard to HS issues and thereby gives us a better perspective on where we are now; a perspective manifest in a global parade of images, people and voices; "a world-wide snapshot of human settlements at a single moment in time", a treasure for students, academics and all those involved in HS issues for years to come.