

Forum of Human Solidarity
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ÇIRAĞAN PALACE ISTANBUL
By Adrian Archambault

The Forum on Human Solidarity was convened by Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary General to Habitat II as a high profile parallel event with the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul, Turkey from June 3-14, 1996. The Forum's goal was to add a different dimension toward improving human settlements, to go beyond the built environment and explore language to describe a spirit of women and men all over the world that binds communities together in solidarity. The Forum on Human Solidarity gathered a group of internationally known and accomplished individuals representing social, cultural, economic, and geographical diversity for a conversation on the common concepts and philosophies that can be called upon to engage and animate the development of human settlement in the 21st century.

In the spring of 1996 I travelled to Istanbul to assist Peter Oberlander, Senior Advisor to the Secretary General for Habitat II, in organizing The Forum on Human Solidarity. Dr. Oberlander, also Canadian, was considerably instrumental in hosting the first United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1976 in my home city of Vancouver Canada. This first conference remains a significant event in the memory of Vancouver and in the city's development. To contribute to this successive conference in Istanbul was an opportunity to continue work that had started in my own hometown. In 1976 Vancouver was an appropriate setting for the Habitat Conference as the city began to identify with many issues shared by growing communities around the world. I discovered that twenty years later Istanbul was an excellent site for the Habitat II Conferences and the future of Human Settlements.

Istanbul is a city of over 12 million people and so is quite different than any Canadian city. A thriving port and centre for culture and trade for centuries, there is a sense on arrival and indeed in the very faces of its citizens that every world culture has passed through this gateway between Europe and Asia. Simultaneous layers of history coexist with Roman walls beside the earliest Christian churches, next to majestic Ottoman mosques. Many structures have served shared uses over time like the colossal Hagia Sophia once the largest church in the world and the centre of Constantinople, then a celebrated mosque and now a civic monument. Despite such diverse social groups, the crowds in its market streets and seemingly permanent rush hour traffic, the city thrives among these challenges shared by cities worldwide and (countries) an outward appearance that would seem also to share a popular description of Canada as a place that, "functions in practice rather than in theory." Yet Istanbul rests as an example of historic urbanization while bridging a gap to modernization, from the clay cuneiform tablets in its archaeological museum to the state of the art, and Canadian made, telephone system in Turkey's UN Habitat host country offices.

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Istanbul served as a perfect setting for Habitat II to illustrate how cities have emerged and where many stand to go forward to the future.

The objectives of the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul, or "The City Summit" as it came to be known, were to address two themes of equal global importance: "Adequate shelter for all" and "Sustainable human settlements development in an urbanizing world". The Habitat II Conference was also the first United Nations meeting in which a wider field of participants could voice their concerns, and engage directly in dialogue with delegations from member countries. Habitat II heard presentations from all the major partner groups in global civil society: parliamentarians, local authorities, Non-Governmental organizations, the private sector and foundations, trade unions, the scientific community, professionals and researchers, as well as Habitat's United Nations partners. Habitat II gathered a full range of interested groups and a diversity of opinions and views to consider issues of central relevance to the survival and sustainability of human settlements; especially cities in the 21st century.

In the spring of 1996 our task was to plan the Forum on Human Solidarity and agree on the responsibilities between the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements and the host country Turkey, beginning first by finding and securing an appropriate site. After consultation with host country organizers and meeting with the then Mayor of Istanbul, now Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a number of venues were considered offsite from the Habitat II conference to provide the possibility of a more public, and hopefully historic, setting. The 16th century Çırağan Palace at the banks of the Bosphorus in Istanbul's "new city" was selected not only for its prominent location but also the convenience of its adjacent facilities that could accommodate forum participants and attendees.

The Forum on Human Solidarity was made possible through a generous grant from Jane and George Russell of the Frank Russell Company in Tacoma Washington, USA with the administrative assistance of the Earth Pledge Foundation in New York, NY. The program for the forum began in the morning with opening statements from each panellist on the theme of Human solidarity and continued in the afternoon with discussion between the participants on the unifying aspects of this theme.

In his opening address, Dr. Wally N'Dow, Secretary-General of Habitat II, thanked the host country Turkey for its role in providing exceptional facilities and atmosphere for the event. Dr N'Dow began the forum by stating that the human spirit will play a crucial role in creating successful, socially integrated cities. "Now caught up in a historic transformation triggered by the urban explosion, our planet faces challenges of the unique inter-relationship that exists between a city and its people, challenges of the ability of both to re-adjust and re-adapt under unprecedented pressures. Habitat II is the international community's response that these challenges can and will be met, that human solidarity may well be our only salvation in the face of such overwhelming change."

The forum, moderated by prominent NBC, CBS and PBS journalist and broadcaster Robert MacNeil, gathered a distinguished panel from around the world; Dr Ruth Cardoso leading social anthropologist and first lady of Brazil; Mr Charles Correa architect and planner of Indian cities; Dr. Ishan Dogramaci, paediatrician, president of the International Association of Paediatricians and President of Bilkent University in Turkey; Mr. Millard Fuller of the United States, founder of the non-profit housing organization Habitat for Humanity International; Dr. Farkhonda Hassan, professor of sociology and member of the Egyptian parliament; Mr. Teddy Kollek former mayor of Jerusalem; Dr. Benjamin Ladner, professor of philosophy and president of the American University in Washington D.C.; Dr. Phyllis Lambert, architect, historian and founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture; The honourable Billie Miller, deputy prime minister and foreign minister of Barbados; Dr. Federico Mayor, Director General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); James Morton, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York; Mr. Nat Nuno Amarteifio of Ghana, architect and Mayor of the city of Accra; Dr. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., eminent American historian; Dr Ismail Serageldin, Vice President of the World Bank; Dr. Rajeesh Tandon, engineer and Executive Director of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia; and Mrs Gorel Thurdin, political scientist, Member and Deputy Speaker of the Swedish Parliament.

Dr Cardoso spoke of solidarity not just as the relation between different groups but between individuals and asked as a question of leadership how this sense could be felt over far greater geographic scales. The shared values of humanity that generate and develop community bonds and social trust in a pluralistic environment need to be affirmed by understanding and sympathy. Charles Correa recalled that rapid urbanization was a major cause of degradation during Europe's Industrial Revolution in the 19th century and is now a threat in the developing world to human dignity and a pressing need for shelter.

Dr Serageldin reminded that 3 billion world citizens still live on less than two dollars a day. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. spoke of the historic emergence of the city as the dominating unit of civilization. Dr Ladner noted the necessity of feeling that our deepest sense of ourselves finds fit with the contours of our surroundings.

Dean Morton held that the unified culture of early and often isolated civilizations is gone forever. ~~With~~^{With} a cultural glorification of greed as described by Mr Fuller, when the cultural images we use for people to define themselves become bereft of substance and we can no longer find ourselves in them, isolation results in individual entities who will try make the best only for themselves, forgetting, "I cannot be myself, by myself," outside of relation to another. Teddy Kollek recognized the challenges of fostering shared values in a plural society. Mr Nuno Amarteifio spoke of the city of Istanbul itself through centuries of civilization as evidence of success in accepting diverse cultures and visitors as permanent residents.

Dr Hussan highlighted how an increase in urbanization brings about a divergence of lifestyles, values and aspirations manifested in a mosaic of little worlds that touch but do not necessarily interpenetrate, weakening social consensus and cohesion. Fearing a growing gap between the rich and poor she proposed sustainable development through the adoption of sustainable ethics, shared values raised out of interaction not just out of a culture of cooperation but by scrutinizing the processes that put people in situations of social degradation.

Dr. Lambert appraised the growing privatization of modern life through information technology and computers as isolating people more from each other. She noted the success of self-governance in housing cooperatives in Montreal as an example of fostering community, cooperation and solidarity through processes that encourage the need to interact. To Mr. Tandon, it is through relationships across cultural differences that mutual bonds are developed and strengthened, but active intervention of residents in a community still depends on security, trust and support. Solidarity is in the action of citizens and often the role of the state and markets alone lead to parochialism.

Millard Fuller reminded the panel that people are 'more likely to act themselves into a new way of thinking than thinking themselves into a new way of acting'; by engaging in the problems of those on the margins of societies we can gain understanding and enable them and ourselves to share the human solidarity for change. Dr. Dogramaci stressed the importance of caring for children and the need to afford dignity across social boundaries.

Dr Mayor stated that economic growth is indispensable and political development necessary but both are not enough and human welfare depends on the moral and intellectual solidarities of humankind; with 600,000 global human settlements without electricity it is only by narrowing social asymmetries that moral solidarity will be sought. He expressed education's role in moving people to act when the disparities between groups often do not allow them to even imagine the lives of others.

Mrs Miller's experience suggested social investments in health, education and housing do pay returns including increasing equality of access. Mrs Thurdin asked where to find solidarity without hope, health and a future in peace. She added peace can come from creating sustainable communities through acceptance of diversity and leadership with political will based in ethics, spiritual values and courage.

A commonality among speakers and commenting members of the audience was that in an environment of divergence of lifestyles, and while recognizing that distribution of knowledge can become inequitable in an information age, solidarity depends on narrowing asymmetries between peoples through tolerance, respect and engagement with dissimilar and distant others so that it becomes an extension of local kinship. Extending to a greater scale what it takes in a community for people to be connected and believe in each other takes resources,

political will, private and public participation and a continued discussion of the role of institutions in societies.

In his closing remarks Peter Oberlander recounted the Forum of Human Solidarity at the Second United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul was conceived as the beginning of an experiment in addressing issues that previously had been too difficult to frame in universal language. The discussion and comments of the forum were to be presented to the Official Delegations of the Conference as evidence of human solidarity as a vital component of human settlements. These did prove to have impact on the wording of the resulting document on the Habitat Agenda: Goal, Principles, Commitments and Global Plan of Action, reported at the conclusion of Habitat II. The Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements endorsed, "the universal goals of ensuring adequate shelter for all and making human settlements safer, healthier, and more liveable, sustainable and productive," and to, "take advantage of opportunities presented by our settlements and their diversity to promote solidarity among all our peoples."

As if completing a circle from where I began my own journey to Habitat II, the declaration recalled the United Nations Conference of Human Settlements held in Vancouver, Canada "which contributed to increased global awareness of the problems of human settlements," the declaration called to, "ensure the full and equal participation of all women and men and the active participation of youth in political, economic and social life." "We shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership," and "with reference to the more than one billion people living in absolute poverty," "reaffirm our commitment to the full and progressive realization of the right to adequate shelter for all."