

THE IRRESISTIBLE FORCE OF HABITAT FORUM

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Al Clapp is seen by many as a master of media manipulation: it is an attribute he finds pleasing. His style is confrontation rather than conciliation, and he will, whenever necessary and possible, trample down people or their ideas that oppose him. A highly placed provincial civil servant who has worked with Clapp nervously observes: "He can come back on someone in government so that your hair would stand on end."

Al Clapp is site manager for Habitat Forum at the old Jericho armed forces base. To many Habitat Forum is Al Clapp. Those whose lives he does not touch, except to excite them through the remarkable accomplishments he has been part of, have called him a "visionary." People who need him as employer or employee use less romantic terms — words like dictator or megalomaniac. "He knows how to push you to the limit to get what he wants, and back off before it all falls apart," says Terry Tanner, President of the Association in Canada Serving Organizations for Human Settlements (ACSOH), the organization responsible for the Habitat Forum site and conference May 27 to June 11.

Clapp is hardly a democrat. "His inability to compromise is something we've had to learn to work around," Tanner confesses. "I can't do things by committee." says Clapp. "When I go into a group, I either sit at the head of the table and run it or I'm not interested in it." As for his uncanny ability to receive credit for work done by others, he reflects, "I have to be a parasite of a lot of people's energy." A strange sort of person, you might think, to be in charge of the site for Habitat Forum, a conference, we are told, at which cooperation must be fundamental to seeking solutions to human settlement problems.

The workers have been on the verge of walking out more than once. Clapp's manipulation of the press, so that published accounts of Habitat Forum doings represent the Clapp point of view, annoys some. They are annoyed, too, when it is regularly reported that all of the people at Jericho are getting paid the same — \$150 a week — and that they were before a bunch of unemployed welfare bums. Many are skilled tradesmen and hold union tickets. None receive less than \$175 a week. Foremen receive \$200, supervisors \$1,000 a month, and Clapp gets \$25,000 plus expenses on his one-year contract. He also had Habitat workers doing body work, painting and mechanical work on his 1986 Chevy.



Photos by Jim Laboury

By Allen Gatt



Work proceeds apace as Habitat Forum arises from the ruin remains of the old Jericho armed forces base, and an iconic martial echoes ring in the way site manager Al Clapp (left) is running a project where, it has been said, "cooperation must be fundamental to seeking solutions to human settlement problems."

For the substantially counter-culture work force, though, Clapp's ubiquitous presence and often arbitrary style of management is a constant reminder that the building of the new Jerusalem is likely contracted out to the inhabitants of the old.

Neither do all workers like the idea of Al Clapp speaking or writing on their behalf. He sent a telegram to Margaret Trudeau on her return from Latin America and a letter to Roy Gauthier of the B.C. and Yukon Territories Building and Construction Trades Council "on behalf of the Jericho workforce." That January 20, 1976 letter came out of the union's attempt to secure work on the Jericho site. Among the other points Clapp made in his letter, he wrote: "In our meeting Friday the vote was unanimous against adding 25 members from your affiliated unions to our present crew." One-third of the people at the meeting abstained, however, while a few voted against the majority. That, given Clapp's usual treatment of dissidents, makes it anything but unanimous. It also throws light on the regular Friday afternoon meetings held by Habitat Forum site workers. One person, still employed by Clapp, said, "Everyone gets off work a half-hour early. There's free beer which arrives at 4:15, and there's usually enough for thirsty people to tip back a couple and every body is feeling a bit numb and glad the weekend is here. It's easy. Who wants to hang around on Friday night and discuss a hassle? I don't."

Clapp is now also causing problems for the people who are supposed to be setting up the Habitat Forum program. Groups like Hope Village, which have been given approval for their exhibits on the site by J.G. Van Patten, the man at the top of the United Nations' Non Governmental Organization (NGO) pyramid, are being delayed by Clapp. At one point, the Hope Village people were ordered to get their material off the site. On March 31, Terry Simmons, a former ACSOH board member and the official agent for Friends of the Earth and Sierra Club, two

NGO's of international repute, was on the site firing up arrangements for displays when Clapp ordered him removed.

Greg Allen, former site exhibit co-ordinator for ACSOH, was barred from the site by Clapp, and in a bitter letter of resignation notes a "loathsome type of autocracy in which participants have no perspective on their work and no opportunity to exercise their creativity. The tedious process of site allocation and Al Clapp's over-extending authority to supersede program recommendations are symptomatic and indicate further difficulties in meeting this severe deadline. The recent firing of the volunteer co-ordinator Doug Miller by Clapp has further eroded my expectations by eliminating my prime production factor: free labor."

Program people now have taken a no fight — no blame position, and hope that Clapp will somehow vanish when the Forum opens.

Al Clapp's life had inauspicious beginnings in Vancouver 47 years ago, and trundled along through a scholastic career that was less than mediocre. Clapp failed grades three, seven and eight, but somehow made it on to the University of British Columbia where he first majored in physical education then went into teacher training but finally dropped out of a potential career where he would fail. "I've been taught by enough bad teachers to know one when I see one." Through the following ten years, Clapp worked for the Forest Service, logging, and spent one brief stint as a special constable with the RCMP at the time of Doukhobor unrest in the early fifties. He sold life insurance for 18 months, and then, 30 years old, was last man hired when B.C. Television (Channel 8) opened its doors in 1960. That was when Clapp began to focus his energy and take off.