

'Last gasp of counter-culture'

Creation of Forum is success story of Habitat

By MALCOLM GRAY
Globe and Mail Reporter

VANCOUVER — From the outside, beyond the sagging frost fence, it doesn't look like much. A former air force base, six large hangars all decorated in Defence Department blah.

So much for first impressions. Up close the base has been remodelled into an exciting setting for Habitat Forum.

This is the unofficial, parallel conference to a United Nations gathering beginning May 31 and attempting to solve, or begin to solve, the problems of human settlement.

But it is at the old base that the ginger groups will gather, as many as 20,000 strong. Here people like anthropologist Margaret Mead, British Historian Barbara Ward and Buckminster Fuller, Mr. Geodesic Dome himself, will push and prod the representatives of world bureaucracies to action.

Habitat Forum is a statement, written appropriately enough in a province of trees, in wood. The hangars have been transformed into meeting places sawed and nailed out of recycled wood. The waste that was allowed to drift away from logging operations has been rescued from the beaches and reshaped into amphitheatres, conference rooms, huge entrance arches and covered boardwalks.

This transformation of the huge base was done for a total cost of \$916,000 in federal funds. That figure becomes significant measured against the \$14-million Canada is paying to hold the official Habitat conference.

Just one structure alone at Habitat, an information pavilion designed by architect Arthur Erickson for only a few weeks use started out with a price tag of more than \$600,000. This was reduced later when the federal Government balked at paying this amount.

How Habitat Forum was put together is a fascinating story now starting to seep into Vancouver's consciousness, months after the work force showed up on the site.

The illusion is, once through the gates, that everyone inside has been frozen in time on a Kitsilano commune circa 1968. This could be the last refuge of the counter-culture, everyone who decided there was a better way in the 1960s than the nine-to-five routine gathered together here to show they could do more than roll perfectly-tailored joints.

But Habitat Forum is anything but a workers' democracy with the conference rooms and huge decorative banners growing organically out wood, nylon and craftsmen's consciousness.

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And the man who has pushed, and bullied the 160 workers to make Habitat Forum the success story of the UN conference is Al Clapp, a 47-year-old former television producer, constantly on the move as if personal demons were gnawing at his belly.

Al Clapp is site manager of Habitat Forum, responsible for getting the place ready in time for a Thursday deadline.

Theoretically he fits into a slot responsible to a board which in turn is linked to the UN and the federal Government, the source of the money used to build Habitat Forum.

But theories can be bent to fit reality. Mr. Clapp has worked himself into a position where he has absolute control over the site and no one can get on the base without his approval.

Terry Tanner is president of the Association in Canada Serving Organizations for Human Settlements. This is the board Mr. Clapp works for. But given the pressures of time and deadlines, what the site director decided became the official line at the Forum, he says.

Al Clapp himself likes to talk about free-flowing energies and people working out concepts at the forum. The catch here is that with a loose format and no over-all plan, a design or project was fine as long as it fitted in with a theme held largely in Mr. Clapp's head.

A worker might find himself ripping down something he had spent days putting in because Al Clapp didn't like how it was developing.

"We have a deadline to meet and there's limited time for discussion. This is like putting together a television news show. Someone has to take responsibility for the finished product and I'm it," said Mr. Clapp.

Construction started in January and along the way, several people who did not agree with Mr. Clapp's vision have fallen from grace, fired and barred from the site.

Among them are Moe Van Nostrum, an architect who did the initial designs for the showpiece of the Forum, a large amphitheatre within one of the hangars.

Mr. Van Nostrum was fired early in January because he hadn't finished the plans for the hangar. He says he couldn't fit his designs into what Mr. Clapp wanted. Al Clapp says the project couldn't afford delay in this key area.

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Al Clapp, the Habitat Forum site manager, maintains close contact with workers on the Vancouver project.

Near one of the arches, a middle-aged woman tourist is standing just inside a hole in the frost-fence perimeter. She looks puzzled by all the beards and pony-tails zooming past on fork-lift trucks.

To Mr. Clapp she is an invasion of the sites security. Within minutes he has shooed her away and personally wrestled the fence closed with a length of steel cable.

No more security problems, but to a work crew using the hole in the fence to bring in materials it means a much longer trip through the main gate. Protests are useless. Al wants the hole closed.

Later, a woman making large hangings suggests they should be made waterproof as the banners will be exposed to rain and sea air.

Fine, but no aerosol cans, an ecological atrocity to anyone concerned about the earth's ozone layer, is Mr. Clapp's decision.

For Mr. Clapp is a man with more than a nodding experience with B.C.'s loose network of people engaged in alternate ways of living.

He has been involved in a scheme to

Greenpeace Foundation on a voyage to confront Russian whalers in April 1975.

So when an official from the United Nations visited Vancouver last year looking for a site for the parallel conference to Habitat, Al Clapp was at his shoulder, pointing out the advantages of the old base.

It sits on the shore with a panoramic view of Vancouver's west end apartment towers across the bay, with the mountains behind. The hangars were there waiting for renovations, and of course, Mr. Clapp had experience on the site sending off the Greenpeace ships.

Habitat Forum has drawn together a mixed workforce ranging from paroled convicts welding old railings salvaged from the Lion's Gate Bridge to craftsmen and artists who saw the site as a chance to put on the show for the world.

They are working for wages ranging from a bottom rate of \$175 a week through the \$1,000 a month paid to some craftsmen and artists to the \$25,000 contract of Mr. Clapp.

As the site neared completion last week it became apparent that some board members were contemplating

Mr. Clapp manoeuvred his way through a crucial board meeting and has been confirmed as the manager of the site during Habitat Forum.

The renewed site has been called "the last gasp of Vancouver's counter-culture." It's easy to see why, looking around the base at workers largely in their late 20s and early 30s; seemingly everyone who dropped out during the 1960s.

They're all here, but Habitat Forum is not the product of a commune work force. It was put together under the drive of a man who does not quibble when referred to as an autocrat or dictator.

The irony is that a conference looking for new ways of solving problems will be held in a setting built by a workforce rigidly controlled from the top.

Few will know, or care. The site is a success, Vancouver has a lively new community centre on a base that was scheduled to be bulldozed into parkland.

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It is instead, a creation put together under restraints of money and deadlines as tough as on any assembly line.

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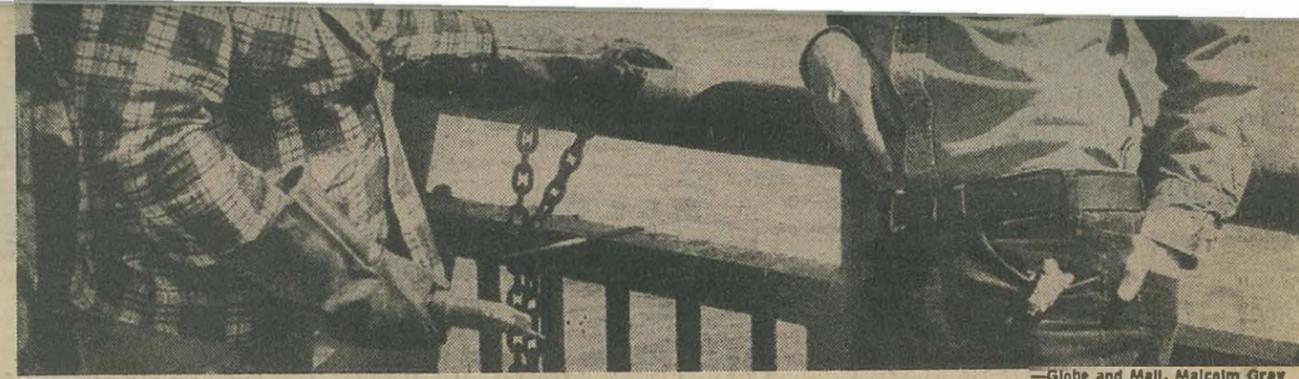
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A tour around the site shows that Al Clapp is not a man who delegates authority to others.



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And even among the workers at Habitat Forum, there has been a noticeable lifting of tensions and morale in the last two weeks as the many disjointed parts started to come together.

For that, Al Clapp with all his abrasive ways, deserves credit.

Canada's middle-of-the-road stand may lead to clashes at Habitat conference

OTTAWA (CP) — The Canadian delegation at the United Nations Habitat conference in Vancouver is expected to take a middle-of-the-road stand, a move that may lead to clashes on land ownership and other issues.

The official UN conference on human settlements, which gets under way Monday, is to conclude with a series of general principles on such issues as water quality, housing and regional development.

A parallel conference of non-governmental organizations begins in Vancouver on

Thursday.

A list of draft principles has been drawn by conference secretary-general Enrique Penalosa and will be discussed by delegates.

The Canadian delegation has prepared documents outlining Canada's starting position on Mr. Penalosa's recommendations. They are sufficiently general to give delegates room to manoeuvre during the conference.

While Canada disagrees only slightly with most of Mr. Penalosa's recommendations, the documents show strong

disagreement on the land issue.

The draft UN proposal says the "plus value resulting from change in use of land or from public investment must be recaptured by the community."

The Canadian interpretation is that this means limiting speculative profits on land sales and channelling these profits to the over-all community.

The phrase "must be recaptured" is considered too extreme and Canadian delegates are expected to press for such wording as "a portion of the

value created by changes in the use of land resulting from public decisions or investment should be captured by the community."

The Canadian position paper argues that the principle of returning some profits from speculation to the Government is not fully accepted in Canada.

However, it notes that tax measures have been introduced by the federal and some provincial governments in recent years to return some profits from speculation to the public treasury.

Canada will also seek to modify a UN draft resolution that "public ownership, transitional or permanent, should be used to implement urban land reform and supply serviced land to those in need of it," sources say.

Canada can accept this resolution provided it does not suggest that public ownership is the only way to influence settlement development.

Canada would prefer that the recommendation suggest that "public ownership... should be used as one possible

method to implement urban land reform and to supply serviced land to those in need of it."

While public ownership is an important way to influencing land use, zoning controls are another way to guide property development, the documents say.

They say Canada believes many of the UN proposals do not take into account the political problems of federated countries such as Canada, where the national government does not have unfettered

freedom to carry out its wishes.

Canada will propose a series of new recommendations.

Among them are suggestions that the needs of women, the handicapped and the elderly should be considered in design of shelter and transportation.

Another Canadian suggestion is expected to be that settlement policies should centre on the problems of growth and decline. For example, one area might be improving the quality of life in cities faced by growing population and economic problems.