

HABITAT REVISITED

Prepared for the World Urban Forum III
Vancouver, B.C. Canada, June 2006
(30th Anniversary of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements
May 29-June 6, 1976, Vancouver, Canada)

PARDON, HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT ?

My introduction to Habitat came in a blizzard of exotic names. In early February 1975, Colin Low, a senior Executive Producer at the National Film Board in Montreal, called me into his office and said he had a project that might interest me. It involved the UN, I'd be spending a lot of time in New York, my boss-to-be's name was Andreas Fuglesang (rhymes with bugle-bang), I would be something called a Liaison Producer.

I shortly found myself in New York in a massive and undistinguished Manhattan commercial building at the corner of Lexington Avenue and 46th St, being introduced to my colleagues at the UN Habitat Secretariat. For the most part they were highly educated professionals in such fields as community, urban and regional planning, architecture, public administration, low-cost housing. Many of them were recruited from the universities and governments of developing countries – the best and the brightest. They included Andres Bande (Chile), Cho Padamse (Singapore), Mustafa Abdelkafi (Algeria), Ashete Abebu (Ethiopia) and of course Andreas Fuglesang (Norway). The Secretary-General (of the Habitat Secretariat) was Enrique Penelosa (Colombia), the Deputy SG was Duccio Turin (Italy). The senior Administrative Officer was a formidable long-time UN executive named Tamar Oppenheimer, who, it turned out was originally from Montreal. Another Canadian was the mellifluously named Darshan Johal, previously with the UN Centre For Housing Building and Planning. Darshan was originally from Victoria, B.C. We had been contemporaries at the University of British Columbia in the 1950s and he, with a degree in what was then called "town planning", had joined the CHBP in the early 60s. Among such euphonious names, that of Jim Carney dropped with a dull thud, something like a cow patty plopping in a barnyard.

THE VISION

A unique feature of the Habitat Conference was that participating governments were invited/requested to submit up to three short (20-30') films or slide shows ("audiovisual presentations") describing the human settlement issues and problem(s) in their respective countries and what they were attempting to do about them. Each main presentation was to be accompanied by a three-minute "capsule version" for use by national speakers at the Plenary sessions of the Conference and during the working committees. The rationale was that as audiovisual media had become so pervasive and influential in our information environment, they should be used to supplement the traditional modes of documents and speeches.

It was realized, however, that many developing countries had no production facilities or experience in AV production; others were very limited. Moreover, as each main presentation as well as its three-minute capsule version had to be “versioned” into five of the six UN languages they had to be delivered to the UN by December 31, 1975 – less than eleven months away.

The Conference organizers first turned for help to the United Nations Department of Public Information (UNDPI), who turned down the invitation. “Impossible” they said. As Canada was hosting the Habitat Conference and the National Film Board was known world-wide for its film-making prowess, the UN asked the Government of Canada to request the National Film Board to assist the Secretariat with the audio-visual program.

Andreas Fuglesang, an intense, brooding idealist, had made his living in advertising in Norway, but his real passion was social anthropology and cross-cultural communication, especially in Africa, where he had spent many years. My background was as a writer-director of documentary films, first with CBC Television and then with the National Film Board. In the late 60s and early 70s I had worked with UNICEF (“Children of the World” – a twelve-part TV series)) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

THE TASK

The Habitat task was daunting: to design and execute a programme of financial and technical assistance for more than 100 developing countries so as to ensure their production of effective audiovisual presentations for the Conference. We were starting from scratch. No budget, no structures or mechanisms; no one knew how much it would cost or even how it would work. Some funding, in the order of two million dollars, had been allocated by the Government of Canada and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

Within a few weeks we had assembled a diverse group of experienced filmmakers, some from the National Film Board (English and French), some from the freelance pool in New York City, several from developing countries. They would work as “Regional Animators”, responsible for a particular group of countries, where they would advise and assist local filmmakers (“national producers”), prod national governments and generally keep things moving. Among the group we had a number of languages, English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Swahili.

One memorable day in New York, we gathered around a large table supporting a map of the world. We carved it up, allocating Central America to Chilean/Canadian Dario Pulgar, Latin America to Mexican Edmundo Palacios, southern Africa to Lucas Chideya and Zambian Ed Moyo. Francophone Africa was assigned to two NFB veterans Michel Regnier and Pierre Vallee. An urbane young Iraqi, Ali Shabou, would work with the Arab-speaking countries. A tall Yugoslavian freelance director/cameraman Vladimir Bibic, had a special interest in Yemen. An emphatic and precise East Indian, “Asthana”, a veteran of the Bombay film industry, was assigned South east Asia. A young, deceptively easy-going Swedish photographer and film-maker, Bo-Eric Gyborg, was our man for Scandinavia.

THE SCHEDULE

We had started in mid-February, 1975. By early April we had organized a series of "Regional Workshops", where the designated national producers for a region, the UN regional animator, Andreas and I worked through specific details of the proposed project(s) in each country. Our first workshop was in Mexico City, made even more memorable when the national producer for Cuba left abruptly to film the take-over of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) by the North Vietnamese.

Within approximately two months we held 5-day regional workshops in Mexico City (Central and Latin America), Addis Ababa (Francophone and Commonwealth Africa), Bangkok (SE Asia) and later Geneva (Europe). For each one we developed how-to manuals, model project outlines, templates for budgets, requirements and specifications for the Conference and so forth.

Once back in New York Andreas worked tirelessly, liaising with governments; hand-writing and telexing terse messages to government officials urging them on. This of course was long before personal computers, e-mail and small-format video tape. I was responsible for, *inter alia*, assessing individual project budgets. We needed to be sure each proposal was relevant, feasible and properly costed.

We decided that the financial assistance would be limited to US \$10,000 per production, primarily to cover foreign exchange costs, principally film processing and printing. Individual budgets were submitted in the local currency of the country. I had to convert each one to US dollars and decide whether the budget-line allocations were realistic. I became temporarily expert in virtually every known currency, from Afghanis to Zlotys. Those were long days.

Post-production, was a major challenge. For developing countries with no or unreliable film laboratories, exposed negative was sent to New York via UN diplomatic pouch, processed in New York and the film either completed there, or sent back to the producing country if the editing, sound editing, mixing and printing could be done there.

Africa posed a special problem. National producers from African countries previously colonized by Britain, France and Belgium, gleefully anticipated long weeks of editing and gracious living in glamorous European capitals: London, Paris and Brussels, Andreas and I knew we had to find an alternative.

Finally, hidden in the middle of a coffee plantation just outside Nairobi, we discovered a little jewel of a post-production studio, owned and operated by a crusty German, Klaus Kreiger, who had been a news cameraman for NBC during the savage Congo fighting of the early 1960s. Housed in a small bungalow complete with louvered shutters, surrounded by coffee plants and banana trees, we found meticulously maintained, state-of-the-art editing, sound recording and mixing equipment; even a small preview theatre. We made a deal with Klaus to rent the whole thing for six months. We then had to staff it.

We assembled another small and eclectic crew of film technicians, principally editors. They included Jacques Bensimon; born in Morocco of a Jewish family, trained in New York (NYU) and employed by the NFB in the mid-1960s, Jacques and I had worked together on several NFB theatrical shorts in the late '60s. He was a superb editor. Thirty years later, Jacques is now Canadian Government Film Commissioner, i.e. head of the NFB.

Sweden's Bo-Eric Gyborg joined us, as did Rita Roy (NFB) and, as crew chief, William ("Bill") Weintraub, a seasoned NFB producer, director, playwright and author "Why Rock the Boat ?" (Little Brown, 1961).

The modus operandi: exposed footage would be sent to New York (Movielaab) for processing and work-printing, back to our Sadie Hawkins studio in the coffee plantation for editing, sound recording and mixing, then back to New York for final printing. Over six months, roughly May to October 1975, our little shop churned out approximately two dozen films – one a week.

By the fall of 1975, some of the films, many far from complete, had started to trickle into our Habitat offices in New York. The Afghan film negative arrived in the form of several large 35 mm film cans, packaged in dusty gunny-sacks. It looked as if it had spent several weeks on the back of a camel train crossing the Hindu Kush. It probably had.

From New York the films were shipped to Toronto, where Doug Leiterman, a brilliant and enterprising ex-CBC producer/director, a driving force behind "This Hour Has Seven Days" some dozen years earlier, had lashed up an operation whereby all of the films, slide presentations and capsules versions would be transferred to video tape and "versioned" into five of the UN's six official languages, The Arabic language tracks were produced in London, UK.

WHAT ARE YOU CHAPS UP TO ?

We had spent much of the early part of that summer – including a riotous weekend at my sainted mother's little cottage on Saturna Island (Andreas, Dario, Bo-Eric and I), developing a "Project Description" and budget for the AV Programme. This remained very much a work in progress. At one point, Tamar Oppenheimer, who though of average stature, always conveyed the impression of speaking from a great height and I suspect was never quite convinced of the value of the AV programme, remarked on all the strange non-UN language she was encountering: Terms like "raw stock", "processing", "rough-cut", "fine-cut", "mixing", "back-up group", "regional animators". "Goodness", she once exclaimed, "I thought I was looking at a budget for a bunch of parking-lot attendants at a slaughterhouse!".

The Deputy SG, Duccio Turin, a distinguished and aristocratic Italian architect, generated some chuckles around the water coolers in the early days by circulating a memorandum stating that he expected the Habitat undertaking to be conducted with "the efficiency and precision of an Italian military campaign."

THE COUNTDOWN

By the end of 1975, very few completed films had been delivered to New York, including those from industrialized countries. We had to stay on, pushing and producing, phoning and telexing.

The presentation arrangements in Vancouver were unprecedented and incredibly complex. Capsules were to be used in the Plenary sessions at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, where heads of delegation would present their national statements, and also at the sites of the two principal working committees, one in the Hotel Vancouver, the other in the Devonshire Hotel. Committee members – each committee comprised two or three hundred delegates - needed to be able to call up their capsules to reinforce points they wished to make in discussion. In other words, the right capsule had to pop up in the right place at the touch of a button by a delegate. Yes, there were some embarrassments.

The longer main presentations were to be seen by delegates, the public and the media at the Project Presentation Centre at the Hyatt Regency Hotel. The Media Centre was in the “Begg Building” at the corner of Georgia and Bute/Thurlow ??, where media could view presentations, collect news releases, contact delegates, do interviews and file their pieces. In short, there had to be several copies of each AV presentation and its capsule, in appropriate languages, in five downtown locations. The presentation systems had been designed by engineering wizard Crieghton Douglas and by and large, in the event, it worked.

By the late spring of 1976 it was decided a small group of us, including Pulgar , Gyborg, Jane Weiner, and Barbara Janes (later NFB's Director of English Production) and myself, would go to Vancouver to help get the show, as I put it, “on the air”. The late delivery of the films had severely impeded Leiterman's versioning and dubbing program, and the complex logistics associated with the use of the AV presentations in Vancouver required that some of us familiar with the AV programme be there.

SHOWTIME !

We arrived in Vancouver on May 19. The Conference was to begin on May 31. To our horror we discovered that not a single video presentation had arrived. A storm of phone calls ensued and we finally received a substantial shipment from Toronto, but as I vaguely recall it was delivered to the wrong warehouse.

Then came the job of sorting everything out and trying to ensure that each element got to the right place in time. The following three weeks in our makeshift offices in the Begg building I remember only as a blur, where night was indistinguishable from day and specific events merged into one continuing effort.

One of my fondest memories of that time was of a small chocolate colored man from Lesotho, Cletus Sethunya. Lesotho is a postage-sized country wholly surrounded by South Africa. It had no film production facilities, no indigenous TV, no film makers. Cletus had been designated Lesotho's national producer on the basis of his work in radio. He had a friend, I believe a druggist, who had a small 16mm

Bolex film camera. Together they made a twenty-minute, totally unpretentious film about a well-drilling project in a small village in the hilly backcountry. It managed to capture, in its naïve way, the incredible significance of the well to the local villagers. It became one of the most popular films of the Conference.

Cletus liked to wear his traditional garb, which included a conical, woven-basket type hat, not unlike those one sees in photographs of our Pacific Northwest indigenous peoples. He came to Vancouver, with his pointy hat, and spent a few days exploring the downtown. At one point I tried to explain to him where the Project Presentation Centre was. He listened carefully, but obviously wasn't understanding my references to the street-names. Aware of my concern, he said gently "Don't worry, I don't know where it is, but I know how to get there." Jesus, I thought, the story of the Habitat Conference. Andreas would have loved it !

NOW WHAT ?

For developing countries, the Habitat audio-visual programme provided a unique, unprecedented opportunity to tell their stories their way to the rest of the world. The AV programme essentially offered them three things: financial support (most of that paid to film processing labs in New York City), technical assistance (the Regional Animators), and an international audience at the Conference in terms of delegations, other governments and international media. They jumped at the chance.

The result was that in a period of about than twelve months, 120 governments produced a total of 200 films and 40 slide presentations, each with a three-minute capsule version. These then were made available on video tape in five of the UN's six official languages. (China did not participate.)

Towards the end of the Conference the question arose: What could/should be done with this mass of AV material ? It not only represented a huge investment in terms of money, effort and national pride, but most importantly, a virtually simultaneous world-wide look at how countries were dealing with their human settlement problems.

The idea emerged that subsequent to the Conference, the AV presentations (AVPs) should be made available globally, especially in developing countries. Although we in the AV unit were strongly supportive of the concept, we were very much aware of the legal, technical and logistical challenges this posed. By law in most countries and internationally, the copyright to any production remains with either the producing company or a government. Anyone wishing to distribute the "product" must acquire appropriate distribution rights from the copyright holder. We were able to use the AVPs at the Conference on the basis of a "License Agreement" with each producer, granting the UN temporary permission for a specific non-commercial purpose. In the real world, the question of distribution rights is complex and always includes issues of territory, exclusivity v. non-exclusivity, commercial v. non-commercial, duration and of course revenue sharing.

The senior Conference officials had a hard time with this. In their view, they had organized the Conference, invited the governments, put up much of the money, paid the bills; in other words they and/or the UN “owned” the films and could do whatever the hell they liked with them.

One memorable scene: I am standing in the men's washroom of the Queen Elizabeth Theatre during a break in one of the final Plenary sessions. Barney Danson, a well-known Canadian federal Liberal, cabinet minister and co-Chair of the Conference and Jim McNeil, a former senior bureaucrat in NDP (New Democratic Party) Saskatchewan and Secretary-General of the Canadian Host Secretariat, have their backs to me while they do what men do in washrooms. I am explaining to them some of the factors described above. I am in fact remonstrating with these two distinguished gentlemen: They can't simply pass a resolution and expect it to happen. Whirling around while zipping up his fly, Jim McNeil glared at me and said: “You're telling me producers tell governments what to do. Wrong. Governments tell producers what to do !” NDP to the core, ole Jim !

Copyright and distribution rights aside, there were also huge technical challenges. The “printing elements” required to produce a film print - what is eventually projected or seen - are many and varied: A-B rolls, internegatives, check prints, sound tracks (sound effects, narration, music, location sound) and more, would all have to be acquired to make the hundreds of additional prints in the five languages to stock regional film libraries around the world. Although much of this material was in New York, a good deal was in Vancouver and more overseas. Slide presentations had to be transferred to film; language-versioned 16 mm film prints had to be produced.

VISION HABITAT

In September, 1976, the UN General Assembly ordered the “*maximum world-wide utilization of the Habitat films*”. This was “Transfer of Technology” at its best. With initial funding from the federal and provincial governments and the forceful advocacy of Dr. Peter Oberlander of UBC, “The United Nations Audio Visual Centre for Human Settlements” (more sensibly soon known as “Vision Habitat”) was established at the University of British Columbia. The fourth floor of the just completed Library Processing Centre, near the Wesbrook Building, would be our home.

The UN was insistent that the UNAVCHS be seen as a United Nations operation, not a creature of the University. A just-retired Director of Radio-Television Services for the UN Department of Public Information in New York, Michael Heyward, was designated Director of Vision Habitat and I became, in effect, the Deputy Director.

A couple of my UN Habitat Secretariat confreres stayed on, notably Dario Pulgar, a raspy-voiced, incredibly energetic, dynamic Chilean. In Chile under Allende, though still in his twenties, Dario had been the number two man in Chile's state film distribution system. He had fetched up at “The Board” after fleeing Pinochet's overthrow of the Allende government in 1973.

Dario was one of the most intellectually and physically robust people I've ever met, with a cast eye and a laugh right from his gut. In my office, with his ferocious intelligence and apparent ability, despite the off-centre eye, to absorb a document at a glance, I often suspected he was reading the mail in my in-basket, *upside down*. His mother tongue was Spanish, but he was fluent in English and had learned French in Montreal in six weeks, he said.

Over the next three years, our small group at UBC, perhaps six people in all, worked at setting up a non-commercial global distribution system for the Habitat films. One of our first tasks was to find, identify, catalogue and store the thousands of different AV elements in Vancouver. During the Conference I had calculated that there had to be approximately ten thousand separate bits and pieces in various places. A young Vancouverite, Nigel Hollick, with no previous experience in film or video, handled this brilliantly. Nigel was not your typical young Kitsilano hippy, much less yuppy. He had been born on a sailboat in Majorca, Spain, of peripatetic and possibly problematic parents and was clearly not headed for a career with the Royal Bank. However, he had a clear and perceptive mind, a talent for detail and a dry, sardonic wit. When I last met him several years ago, he was a production manager with Pacific Motion Pictures in Vancouver.

Dario was primarily occupied with acquiring distribution rights and determining where the off-shore printing materials were. Michael Heyward and I focused on operational planning, budgeting, and establishing the regional offices. Michael, in addition, had to liaise with the UN and the Canadian governments. We were greatly assisted by some marvelously competent and dedicated women (names to come), including a gracious and clever young lady from British Guyana, Phyllis Eleazar, who went on to an impressive UN career and to whom I owe much.

Within a surprisingly short time, we had established Vision Habitat regional offices in Amman, Bangkok, Budapest, Dakar (briefly), Geneva, Mexico City, Nairobi and Vancouver. Vancouver remained VH headquarters. Many of our regional animators were "naturals" to staff the offices; Ali Shabou in Amman, Asthana In Bangkok, Madame Magdalena Medvesky in Budapest, Madame Odette Constantin in Geneva, Edmundo Palacios in Mexico City, and Ed Moyo in Nairobi. Each office had to be supplied with films and video tapes in languages appropriate to the region. Small-format video (UMATIC) playback facilities were not widespread in many developing countries and technical standards varied by region (as between NTSC, PAL, and SECAM) and were mutually incompatible. 16mm film remained the only truly global AV medium, and it had to be physically shipped everywhere.

THE UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

In the autumn of 1979, the General Assembly created the "United Nations Centre for Human Settlements" as a full-fledged UN agency, to be headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. It was conceived as a sister agency to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), established following the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. UNEP (then the only UN headquarters located in a developing country) was located at Gigiri, just outside Nairobi. UNCHS initially occupied

the 26th and 27th floors of the 28-storey Kenyatta Conference Centre in downtown Nairobi, but eventually moved to Gigiri, cheek to cheek with UNEP.

UNCHS had five components: The Office of the Executive Director, the Division of Research and Development (with an emphasis on Training), the Division of Technical Cooperation (working with governments and donor agencies on project implementation) and lastly, the Division of Information, Audio-Visual and Documentation (DIAVD), responsible for a) the physical production - in six languages - and global dissemination of the research papers and publications developed by R&D and Training, b) the world-wide dissemination of information on Human Settlements issues to governments, universities and professional organizations and c) the management and world-wide distribution of the Habitat films via the regional information offices.

The first major operational step in creating the new agency was the establishment of the Commission on Human Settlements, a sort of governing council or board of directors. Some eighty-odd governments initially became members of the Commission, each government sending anywhere from three to ten members to the Commission's biannual meetings (always in a different city, e.g. Helsinki, Finland; Libreville, Gabon; Kingston, Jamaica), where work-programmes and budgets would be approved or amended, priorities set, and many often hotly-contested issues discussed.

One of the key and most challenging documents to prepare for the first meeting of the Commission in Nairobi was the "Work Programme", a document describing with great specificity the tasks each division would complete over UNCH's first two years in terms of "outputs" (activities and product) v. "inputs" (money and manpower). Talk about spinning whole cloth out of thin air.

It was an excruciating process, a monster Rubric's Cube. Each division began with certain givens, principally the number of authorized "posts" (staff positions), categorized, depending on source of funding, as "regular budget" or "extra-budgetary". Each task had to be costed. DIAVD had certain knowns (e.g. the cost of running the Vision Habitat regional offices, the cost of producing a poster, etc.) but we had no way of knowing the demands to be placed on us by the other divisions in terms of the translation, editing, printing and dissemination of materials, or the production of AV presentations. And they were in no position to tell us.

Though the planners for each division worked separately, the overall Work Programme, the sum of all the inputs v. the outputs of each division, had to be a perfect match with the "Establishment" approved for UNCHS and the funding available. At that point we could not be sure what extra-budgetary resources we would have as they depended on voluntary contributions from governments. The image that came to my mind was of six men, each completely deaf, mute and blind, struggling to create a perfect cube from a lump of plasticine. (In fact, the voluntary contributions were not as high as hoped, thus the work programme we had designed, approved by the Commission and were obliged to deliver was severely underfunded – a classic UN problem.)

By early 1980, with UNCHS more or less operational in Nairobi, Andreas Fuglesang was appointed Chief of the Division of Information, Audio-Visual and Information. He assembled a team, some local Kenyans (black and white), some young expats (Indians, Brits and Aussies), some UN professionals (particularly for the translation chores, where accuracy is critical). I remained at the erstwhile Vision Habitat offices at UBC, with Phyllis Eleazar, as the “UNCHS Information Officer for North America and the Caribbean”. I dreaded being introduced to people and being asked “and what do you do?”. I could see their eyes glaze over as I tried to explain.

In March of 1983, Andreas returned to Sweden to take up a post with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. He proposed (indeed insisted) that I go to Nairobi as his replacement. For personal reasons, I agreed to go only on a temporary basis.

I arrived in Nairobi, at UNCHS headquarters in Gigiri, in March, 1983. I'd met many of the members of Andreas' team on previous occasions and we got along well. They were competent, dedicated and reliable. The work load was horrendous. It was six months before I took a day off. I was not unusual in that regard.

Nonetheless, I found the work and the challenges exhilarating. At the end of my first six weeks, I met with UNCHS' Executive Director, Dr. Ramachandran, a man of incandescent intelligence and energy, and told him I had changed my mind and wanted the job on a more permanent basis. I remained in the post until April, 1986, when I returned to my hometown, Vancouver, as Commissioner General of the UN pavilion at Expo '86. And that's another story !!

IN THE END – WHY ?

I spent a total of thirteen years on the Habitat programme. I was and still am frequently asked “What is the value of these global UN conferences?”, “Do they change anything?”, “Was it worth it?”, My answer is a resounding “Yes !” Fundamentally, in brief, because such global conferences put pressure on governments to collectively agree to identify, acknowledge, discuss, exchange information and develop and compare solutions to overarching global problems. Responsible ministers gain clout at the cabinet table; issues they represent rise higher on government agendas. Such conferences help establish norms, advancing the goal posts of what is considered acceptable behaviour.

The degree to which improvement actually occurs is dependent on the will, priorities and resources of individual governments – including donor states - who simultaneously must confront and deal with other huge problems.

Only in retrospect can I truly appreciate how innovative and audacious the audio-visual programme of the 1976 Habitat Conference was. Today, the international and instantaneous exchange of unimaginable volumes of audio, visual and textual information and data by electronic means is taken for granted. Thirty years ago, with rare exceptions (usually military), information existed principally in the form of documents, audio, video tape and film and had to be physically flown and shipped across continents and oceans.

Even so, when was the last time you saw a film or video produced in a developing country, by its own people, telling their story, their way ? Probably not since 1976. Think about it.

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