

WILL HOT AIR EVER HOUSE THE POOR?

Pat Crooke



By the end of the century, United Nations researchers calculate, the poorer two-thirds of the world need to create as many jobs and build as many homes as the industrialised countries have done in the whole course of their history. Yet to tackle this daunting task they command only one-eighth of the world's current income. "Innovative approaches are needed," says the UN Secretariat. In a magisterial understatement. Some 4,500 official delegates, from 134 countries, met in Vancouver last week in an attempt to find some. PETER WILSHER reports from Habitat, the world conference on human settlements.

"HUMAN SETTLEMENT improvement," says Helena Bentzer, of the UN environment programme, "could be the world's greatest growth industry." The first instalment, probably totalling around \$100m, is being collected right here, in Canada's richest city, by the medals of badges, lapel pins, posters, hotel rooms, airline tickets and "audio-visual input." Our own Robert Maxwell, of Pergamon Press, is launching a new Habitat magazine and has secured exclusive rights (in exchange for 12% royalty) to edit, package and republish the mounds of background documentation collected on the plight of the world's most miserable citizens. But whether the citizens themselves will receive even 10 cents worth of help as a result of all this talk remains deeply unclear.

Habitat is the latest in the series of global gatherings which started four years ago in Stockholm (the environment) and have progressed through Bucharest (population), Rome (food), Mexico City (women), Nairobi (trade) and now to the smiling shores of British Columbia.

The rationale of these things has been succinctly set out by Mahbub al Haq, the Cambridge and Yale trained Pakistani who directs the World Bank's policy planning department. It lies, he says, "in a realisation by the poor nations that they can negotiate a better deal at the international level, through the instrument of collective bargaining. While the new trade unionism of the poor nations has yet to take a concrete and specific form, its objectives are clear: a greater equality of opportunity and participation as equals round the bargaining tables of the world."

There are, however, certain rules required for "an orderly dialogue." In particular, the rich and the poor have to agree that serious negotiations are necessary and acceptable in principle, so that they start with some real commitment to get somewhere; and they must narrow the areas of negotiations down to manageable proportions. Both these conditions seem to have been comprehensively ignored in the



The Tondo slum area: rehousing hopes held back by Manila's martial-law politics.

harmonious integration or co-operation of a wide variety of components." There is a set of recommendations for national action (eg, "the key issue in infrastructure policy must be to achieve greater equity of access to goods, services and information"). And there are the programmes for international co-operation, which boil down to an argument over the desirability and possible site for yet another UN agency to hand out whatever cheese-parings amounts of "educational aid" and "technical assistance" the members can be persuaded to volunteer.

Being totally vague and all-embracing, these propositions allow for the introduction of almost any topic under the sun, and few delegates seem able to resist the temptation. Far more time has been spent in the first week over the proliferation

of 200m people on earth whose living conditions are already characterised by "intolerable congestion and squalor."

Even when the chat, relayed by closed-circuit colour TV from four hotels, three committee rooms and Vancouver's largest theatre, does happen to



touch on humdrum matters like drains and rental levels, its emptiness has to be heard to be believed.

One Australian delegate, Norman Fischer, launched a broadside attack on "recommendations so vague as to be

Studies, explains with bitter lucidity that discussing housing for the poor "means discussing how half the population of the world lives and dwells. A poor man is a badly-fed, badly-dressed, illiterate or semi-illiterate human being who lives in a rudimentary rural shelter or a run-down house, badly serviced, and surrounded by garbage."

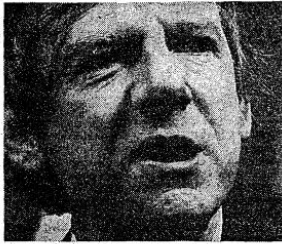
Up in the main official hall, though, Canada's Premier, Pierre Trudeau, had little practical help to offer the other half. He merely suggested, cautiously, that there would soon be so many people to socialise—by which he did not mean joining the Labour Party of Canada, but "loving one another, and the only type of love which would be effective in the tightly-packed world we already live in would be a passionate love."

The passionate love does not seem to extend noticeably to Canada's submerged 14%—the newly-militant Indian communities, with their high crime rates, alcoholism and welfare-dependency, but also with their extremely inconvenient land claims, which give them a potential interest in 80% of British Columbia and virtually the whole of the Yukon and the North-West Territory. A Royal commission has been sitting for over a year to assess the interests of several dozen small Indian communities in the vast Mackenzie River oil pipeline scheme, and the rising Indian birthrate threatens to intensify minority problems in Canada's big cities over the next decade, but Trudeau brushed off attempts to raise this domestic aspect of the "Habitat" problems.

Like the tough US Housing Secretary, Carla Mills, Britain's Secretary for the Environment, Peter Shore, and the leaders from Japan and West Germany, he also parried any suggestion that some cash might be laid on the table by the developed countries as a first step towards solving the problems of a city like Madras or Nairobi, where over 60% of the people could not afford to buy even the cheapest form of officially acceptable housing, or the electricity-fueled half of the world's population who are still plunged into darkness as soon as the sun goes down.

The only explicit suggestion of this kind has come from Barbara Ward, who calls for \$30 billion a year over 10 years from the industrial and oil-rich countries to "bring the majority of mankind to the level of minimum human needs." And if that was too much, she told a specially-convened plenary session, then a mere \$3 billion a year for a decade would bring virtually all communities the blessing of "pure, sweet water." She received a standing ovation, but no cheques.

Part of the trouble, fairly obviously, lies with the Third World governments themselves, who have patently failed to agree any clear-cut limited set of demands which might have some chance of acceptance in the rather tense, post-United world. Mexico's President, Luis Echeverria, whose encouragement accounts for a quarter of the government delegates here—all part of his bid to be the next UN Secretary-General—was widely expected to articu-



Peter Shore: potential power



Carla Mills: tough US delegate



Pierre Trudeau: call to love



Luis Echeverria: "firework display"

been kicking around the international agencies for years, but it needs some major country or group to give it a political push. No sign of such initiatives is to be seen here.

Instead there is pious talk. The West would like to help, but they have balance of payments problems. The OFEC nations don't see why they should do it all. The Soviet-Union socialist powers talk about revolution, but keep tight hold of the rubles. And China, which probably knows more about practical solutions to the Habitat complex of human problems than any other nation on earth, decided at the last moment not to come.

Ironically, too, the World Bank, which funnels more money each year into the slums and shanty towns that now house half the world's urban population than all other institutions put together, has almost the smallest delega-

tion here. The programme scored a great success with the distribution of free village TV sets. Parents watched and the figures dropped dramatically. But repeated in India, the experiment was a disaster. The children were sent to watch, and new births soared.

A more elaborate, and more directly relevant example is



to be found right here in the Vancouver art gallery. The highspot of the Habitat exhibition is the prizewinning entry in an international architectural contest, which called for cheap, ingenious and as far as possible self-help solutions for the redevelopment of one of Manila's most teeming squatter settlements.

The \$35,000 winner, Ian Athfield, has never previously been outside New Zealand, but he has put in an immense sympathetic effort, creating gardens and job-opportunities, integrating ingenious forms of do-it-yourself energy, and making maximum use of the ubiquitous local coconut palm as his basic building material, to produce housing that he insists (though other knowledgeable self-builders doubt) is within the reach of Manila's dirt-poor.

But then the problems start. The Tondo foreshore, which is being cleared for a new container-base and fishport, and the Dagat-dagatang development to which its tough, self-sufficient squatters are to be moved, are the subject of a large \$34m loan now being negotiated between the World Bank and the Philippine Government. They are also right bang in the middle of Manila's martial-law politics.

When the bank team went to the Philippines last year, one of the most vociferous squatter-leaders was temporarily arrested and confined until after the officials had left. When the World Council of Churches put up money so that five of the squatters could go to Vancouver for the judging of the competition they were not allowed to leave the country.

Squatting has always been technically illegal in the Philippines, but only this month the first-ever arrests were made for this "crime," of which something like 1 billion people around the world are guilty at this moment. The first houses actually built on the Dagat-dagatang site are not to Vancouver for the judging of the competition they were not allowed to leave the country. Squatting has always been technically illegal in the Philippines, but only this month the first-ever arrests were made for this "crime," of which something like 1 billion people around the world are guilty at this moment. The first houses actually built on the Dagat-dagatang site are not to Vancouver for the judging of the competition they were not allowed to leave the country.

There are two possible last words at the end of the first week. One, in the form of three questions, comes from the bank's Mahbub al Haq. "What are the chances of designing and implementing a new framework for international resources transfers? Why would we assume the necessary political will and the enlightened international attitude that is needed even to begin travelling down this road? Or is this the whole conception a mere exercise in futility?"

The other is embodied in an exchange recorded at children's Habitat, where the offspring of delegates are entertained with a replica of the grow-ups' conference up-town.

Interviewer: What do you think are the big problems of Habitat?

Child: I don't know. The poor?

Interviewer: Do you have any specific problems, any troubles?

Child: I don't have any problems. We rich. Somebody came to rob us once but they caught him.

Interviewer: Are you enjoying this conference?

Child: No. We're all just waiting to go on holidays.



Salient points from the Report and Statement by the Chairman, Mr. Eric C. Sayers, for the year ended 31st January 1976.

The recession in demand in UK and overseas markets affected all parts of the Group with particularly serious effect upon the Steel Division. Group profits before taxation for the first half of the year were reported at £1,472,000. Since then there has been a modest recovery in the Group's



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