



Comment: Inhabiting Habitat

by Joseph Baker

Now 30 years old, Canada's most famous housing experiment is occupied by a well-heeled crowd who have transformed its interiors in their very own style.

Glimpse Habitat 67 through the grain elevators and warehouses of the Montreal port area and its romantic silhouette is a reproach to the familiar platitudes of the highrise apartment blocks of the city's core and fringes. Approach it on a sunny day, its chiaroscuro in full display, and something of the spirit that filled the air during the heady days of the 1967 World Exhibition works its magic. Walk through the Piranesian substructure under concrete pods seemingly and breathtakingly dangling in space, or climb the twisting stairways to the aerial passageways that look down on planted terraces with tables set for lunch al fresco, and be transported to the coastal cities of the Mediterranean and the Aegean islands. It lacks but the cries of the street vendors, the clatter of a laden donkey. Some might quibble with this view, and, seeing the unrelieved concrete surfaces darkened under inclement skies would evoke less sympathetic, perhaps totalitarian analogies. Yet as an exhibition showpiece Habitat has earned a place in the annals of Architecture; witness the endless international stream of visitors that make it a point of pilgrimage. It continues to conjure up an enviable vision of urban living that excites the imagination, a dream of a home for Everyman.

Well, the 60s were a time for dreams. NASA Space Age technology inspired Archi-

gram's Plug-in-City. Operation Break-through bet heavily on building systems, with homes rolling off the belt like automobiles (nobody stopped to figure out the cost per square foot of an automobile). Habitat's designer was convinced that "the existing patterns could be broken if we were able to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into large scale prototypes." Millions were sunk into the Concorde that was supposed to revolutionize air travel but failed to get an order outside of the state-run British Airways. It continues to race the sun across the Atlantic with its meagre payload of the rich and famous while lesser folk are content to be served by the workhorse 747 and Airbus.

A post-construction evaluation showed that the varied groupings of forms that made Habitat so aesthetically exciting precluded it as a demonstration of rational systems building. At 20 units to the acre it had achieved the site density of traditional row housing, and at 8 to 10 times the cost of the latter it placed itself far beyond the reach of the clientele that CMHC, Habitat's sponsor, was mandated to serve. Clearly it was not an economical method of producing mass housing. This point is old territory but worth re-stating if only because a generation of Canadian architects and builders, despite their very genuine contributions to the improvement of housing choices—optimum land use, community and privacy,

pedestrian safety, affordable cost—have suffered odious comparison with the unattainable chimera on Cité du Havre.

Unattainable? Well not quite. After being leased at rents which, even if they were up-market, could never have amortized the \$26 million investment, and after substantial repair, Habitat was sold in 1986 at a knock-down price of less than half its cost. Habitat went to a Limited Partnership that included 75 per cent of the current residents and had no problem recruiting others. At \$52,500 for a 1,200-s.f. (two module) unit or \$80,000 for 1,800 s.f. the offering was attractive. Habitat now presents a picture of an ideal community: well-administered, books balanced, every contingency foreseen, all changes subject to approved criteria and Moshe Safdie's authorization. Municipal taxes, maintenance of building and grounds, provision for improvements (reviewed and agreed at the Partnership's annual meetings), heating, hydro, security guards, a shuttle bus service uptown and indoor parking for 200 cars are included in a competitive monthly fee. Prestigious and admiring visitors are welcomed, their attention only adding to the Special Partners' equity. Isn't it the best of all possible worlds?

While all the Special Partners cleave to the strict maintenance of Habitat's original exterior form—which apart from the enclosing of a good number of the generous terraces with approved solariums—remains unchanged, the remake of its interiors seems to have been inspired by an inverse desire for self-expression. Two- and three-module units may be the norm, but nothing has prevented the acquisition of four or more. Residents expand into adjacent modules like the inhabitants of Puglia's *trulli*. Better, they expand upwards and downwards creating labyrinthine mansions of eight modules (5,000 s.f.). One—in the Japanese manner—was described with the admiration one would reserve for a Kyoto palace. Another that I was graciously invited to visit housed what appeared to be the erstwhile contents of a 26-room Westmount mansion. Doors and panelling had been carved by a team of Austrian craftsmen that would do credit to Grinling Gibbons—the same craftsmen had apparently done work for the Nixons

Facing page and right: recent views of Habitat. The jumble of modular units has weathered well after 30 years, the added solariums, enclosed terraces and mature landscaping making the complex less stark than when it opened for Expo '67. Safdie planned 1,000 living units but only 158 units (354 modules) were built. The basic module is a precast elongated cube measuring 600 square feet or 55 m² which was partially prefabricated and lifted into position by crane. Modules could be combined in various configurations (16 possible arrangements were shown in *Canadian Architect*).

What Was Said 30 Years Ago

"Habitat reminds us that a major reorganization in the technical field requires a major reorganization among the professions. Architect, researcher, manufacturer must all be a single entity working to a common goal. This will take place eventually, but it will take a revolution to bring it about. And this is where the large-scale prototype produces the shock treatment needed to bring about another change."

Moshe Safdie, *The Canadian Architect*, October 1967.

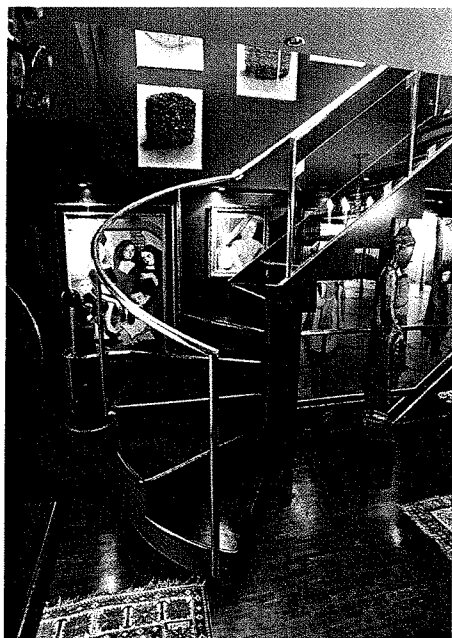
"Habitat, as built, is not a high-density solution. Indeed, it is a moderate-density proposition. Twenty units per acre is no answer to city form. Doubling or tripling its 12 storey heights (if technically possible) would leave the density unaffected if the basic cross-section of the complex continues to recognize Habitat's primary objective—a terraced garden for each dwelling unit, stacked up the sloping pyramid of its cross-sectional geometry and with adequate light penetration to the (increasingly useless)

central void consequent upon its increased height... Habitat is incapable of the five or six times density multiplication to match orthodox highrise apartments which offer as much as 85 per cent of their sites in green open space for the social and recreational purpose of truly urban density configurations. Habitat, in a density sense, offers no more than may be achieved, with more familiar human scale, improved privacy and direct contact with the natural site, by horizontal multiple dwelling systems requiring but a fraction of Habitat's cost." James Murray, *Ibid.*

"Is it possible that the passions aroused by this building will in turn seriously direct people's thoughts to the grimmer questions of housing the millions in India and Detroit? More thoughtful architects now eye the slums and the race riots in the U.S.A. and ask themselves: Have we as architects failed to lead the way and provide the answers? If Habitat nudges the conscience into action it might have succeeded beyond an experiment in systems building."

Robert Gretton, *ibid.*





all this in a place designed for the working man and his family," mused one very satisfied Special Partner—more accurately for four working families! This is gentrification with a vengeance, the same process that saw the homes of other workers in Washington's Georgetown and Toronto's Cabbagetown gutted and done over in designer chic, the public housing of Thatcher's England tarted up and short-term

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leased to visitors on expense accounts. The difference is that Habitat never did reach its intended inhabitants. Gentrification was instantaneous, and perhaps it is as well, for one wonders how a less favoured population might have fared in this environment. In communities where danger presents itself as much from a few bad apples within as from without, would the streets in the air, the unguarded elevators and stairways, the cavernous spaces that thread through the complex become scenes of menace and vandalism as they have elsewhere? How well do they respond to Oscar Newman's criteria of Defensible Space?

On the other hand our working family, while lacking the means to acquire another module or two, might have been less fastidious about architectural controls. Unable to afford sleek solariums they might have sought an extra room for little Elsie with a self-built add-on, solved their storage problem with a Montreal "hangar" (shed) on the terrace, personalized the entrance with a fibreglass gable, brightened up the concrete on the terrace with a dab of colour. The under-used underbelly might have spawned a number of PME's (*petites et moyennes entreprises*), the odd repair shop, home improvement supplier, a co-op bakery, community clinic ... Begins to sound not at all bad.

Habitat may never have worked as social housing and it could be that it has known a better fate than the infamous Pruitt Igoe. But then again, if the aediles of St. Louis had restrained the use of dynamite to punching a few holes through three or four storeys, parcelling off 4,000 square feet suitable for imaginative conversion by persons of taste, offering a tax-break in perpetuity, attentive management and round the clock security, who knows what might have been achieved to restore the good name of the project and its architects.

There has never been another Habitat, and there never could be. A move is afoot to classify it as a historic monument. And why not? Was there ever such a time of innocence as that summer of Expo 67? ●

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Photos above: Inside three apartments of Habitat. Top photos, residence of Constance Brown and Jack Greenwald; left, residence of Jean-Paul Laugault and Louise Martin; right, apartment owned by Bruce Baird.

at the White House. A two-storey space that took care of the grand piano was complemented with a sculptural collage of musical instruments. The billiard room sported an upholstered ceiling inlaid with dozens of halogen spotlights. How to get two tons of slate for the table bed up to the sixth floor presented a considerable challenge. This problem elicited the only critical word concerning the otherwise revered architect: "He obviously didn't think that people would collect furniture or sculpture." Tut! How could he?—accommodating billiard tables, Louis Quinze dining suites, Cesars and Armans wasn't in CMHC's brief.

One or two original Habitat bathrooms and kitchens—in design terms they were well ahead of anything on the market in the 60s—survive the gut and strip treatment. In a pinch the originals serve the extra guest or live-in help. Generally marble and granite lavishly cover walls and counters. "Mr. Safdie's straight lines" have given way to curves, solid white balustrades, etched glass and carved newel posts. Not all the Partners have enjoyed the luxury of combining units and seem to have difficulty adapting furnishing schemes that were at home in their previous residences to the limitations of the modules' more modest proportions. Accommodating

overstuffed bed headrests and velvet valances has proved quite vexing.

What is it that bound or brought this mixture of professionals, lawyers, stock-brokers and art lovers to Habitat? They had no doubt looked over some of Montreal's luxury-class apartments, probably Mies' Westmount Square, Port Royal, the Sanctuaire and even Habitat's neighbour, Tropiques Nord, which sports a giant south-facing atrium ("too humid," said one). When stiffening joints and a fluttery heart made it time to say good-bye to the dubious joys of maintaining a large empty nest, a snow-filled driveway, none of the alternatives offered the advantages of Habitat in terms of location, view and outdoor living. The shuttle bus to downtown puts Place Ville Marie, Holt Renfrew and a seat at Place des Arts 10 to 15 minutes away. The views are unbeatable. Montreal's skyline is a backdrop to the varied traffic of tankers, pleasure cruisers and small craft that ply the port. From a front door the rushing waters of the St. Lawrence are framed by one's cantilevered neighbours. Terraces that scoff at anything a rival might offer in terms of size can host a gala for a favourite charity or political party.

And then of course there is the price—"Who would have thought you could have done