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“Land. That’s What Habitat Was About”

Moira Farrow, *The Vancouver Sun*

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In spite of the war of words between Israel and the Arabs, in spite of the militancy and marching over nuclear energy, the key word at Habitat was land.

Like a rock thrown into a pond, the land debate is going to ripple around the world for many years, because it’s as close to the heart of the high-rise developer in London and the farmer in Moose Jaw as it is to the slum dweller in Nairobi and the suburban home-owner in Burnaby.

Land ownership: should it be public, or private or a mixture of both? And if it's a mixture, what is the fairest formula?

Those are the questions that produced hours of torturous debate in Habitat’s working committees. And the result, the day, before the conference ended, was consensus on a recommendation calling, for the "appropriate recapture" of unearned profits that result from a rise in land values.

Methods of recapturing these profits would range from capital gains taxes to land taxes on "unused and under-utilized land." The fact that this recommendation was adopted unanimously is extremely significant because, in its last hours, Habitat became famous for its lack of consensus over its final declaration.

But there was a lot more to this recommendation than the phrase about “appropriate recapture,” which is the one the editorial writers got excited about.

The section devoted to land in the Habitat document begins with the assumption that private land ownership is “a principal instrument of accumulation and concentration of wealth and, therefore, contributes to social injustice.”

The achievement of social justice and the renewal of cities, it says, is only possible if land is used in the interests of society as a whole.

It continues: "Public ownership or effective control of land the public interest is the single most important means of achieving a most equitable distribution of the benefits of development."

The document is emphatic about the need to control farm land from being swallowed up by urban use. And it says that, in many countries, it may be essential to restructure “the entire system of ownership rights.” Pretty powerful stuff and it was adopted without a whimper by 134 nations.

Anyone who thinks these recommendations are going to be filed and forgotten should take a look at the Saturday edition of *The Vancouver Sun*. In three separate sections of the newspaper there was evidence that the land-ownership issue is already causing ripples [that] are likely to turn into waves.

The far-right Canadian League of Rights was so upset by developments at Habitat that it took a full-page advertisement denouncing the land proposals. "Wake up, Canada" screamed the ad, which—incorrectly—said the federal government agrees to a principle of "confiscation of up to 100 per cent of all unearned land profits."

The league, of course, is the same organization that frantically opposed establishment of the B.C. Land Commission and distributed a Swastika-decorated leaflet likening the then premier, Dave Barrett, to Hitler and Mussolini.

More thoughtful reaction came in a letter to the editor from a Langley man, Michael Jordan, who praised the opinions of University of B.C. associate professor of commerce and business administration, Mike Goldberg. A member of a group of 10 Canadian academics set up to observe and assess Habitat, Goldberg suggested several ways in which governments can improve housing, as he said, "high house prices create high land prices, not the other way around."

In another section of the paper, a news story from the Fraser Valley described a campaign waged by a group of local people to prevent some prime farm land from being sold for industrial development.

One of the campaign organizers, George Preston, constantly quoted the Habitat proposals on farm land preservation as he described the efforts to save 10 threatened acres near Langley.

A similar battle is being waged in Chilliwack, where a group of farmers is trying to prevent 1,800 acres of agricultural land from being blacktopped.

These are just two examples of farmland fights taking place within a few miles of each other outside Vancouver. Many more are probably going on right across this country and wherever, in future, there's a clash between agriculture and industry, the resolutions of Habitat are sure to be quoted.

Canada seemed to agonize over the land recommendations, more than any other country. The [U.S.] Americans took the blatantly false position that taxes and assessments already turn land profits to the community in their country and said they had no problem in accepting the Habitat position on land. And the British looked pious and said their new community land act will virtually eliminate exorbitant profits from the sale of development land.

But the reaction of developed countries to the land recommendation is only part of the story.

In the squatter communities of the Third World land ownership is a critical issue. Urban Affairs Minister Barney Danson, during his trip to Africa shortly before Habitat, teared that the only way to upgrade a slum is to give its inhabitants land tenure.

It's surprising that this concept has taken so long to be understood in the Third World because it's really very obvious. No man or woman is going to spend much time improving his slum home if it's likely to be bulldozed into the ground by the government at any time. And it's basic human nature that people will take more care of something they own rather than something they rent.

It's, therefore, important to note that the Habitat land recommendation does not suggest eliminating all private land ownership. Even the British economist and environmentalist Barbara Ward, who made such an impact on the conference, does not want that to happen.

The Vancouver Symposium of 24 internationally known “thinkers,” whom Miss Ward brought to Habitat, proposed public control over land use and not public ownership of all land.

But Miss Ward's symposium did ask for all unearned profit from land sales to be returned to the community. Many Habitat Forum delegates disagreed with her on this issue, pointing out that a slum-dweller must be allowed to make a profit on selling his property if he's ever going to improve his circumstances. If there is no market value on slum land, the squatter will be bound to the same cardboard shack forever.

So the final Habitat resolution calling for the public recapture of “appropriate” profits (a wording that Canada worked hard to achieve) is probably a good compromise. The inclusion of that one word, appropriate, will enable an African squatter to keep all the profits from the resale of his tiny piece of slum land. And, at the same time, it will enable the community to recapture a substantial portion of the profits piled up by a developer who makes a financial killing from a real estate deal.

But only time will tell if it's possible to translate that word “appropriate” into legislation that is acceptable to both rich and poor.

Miss Ward's symposium should be commended for its recognition of “self-help” housing, which, astonishingly, was not mentioned specifically in the final Habitat document.

The symposium members said migrant communities should be encouraged in their efforts to house themselves by security of tenure and provision of essential services. This sort of approach to helping squatters is being recognized now around the world as virtually the only successful approach.

Population is increasing so fast that the only way to house the millions of poor is to upgrade existing slums with roads, water and sewer facilities and provide the newcomers to cities with “sites and services”—meaning a piece of serviced land on which they can build their own dwelling.

There is no developing country in the world that can afford to re-house—in the western sense of the word—all its slum-dwellers. Even low-cost housing is too expensive for the millions of very poor people squatting on the outskirts of big cities.

This reality is believed to be behind the current unrest in Manila, where thousands of squatters are protesting a planned low-income development designed by a New Zealand architect. The squatters fear they won't be able to afford the new development and, in the process, they will lose the shacks that are currently their homes.

It's, therefore, very surprising that “sites and services” housing was not mentioned by the main conference, even though the symposium was talking about it before Habitat began.

And then there were the politics [that] overwhelmed the last few days of the conference. As everyone with the faintest interest in Habitat knows by now, there was no agreement on the final declaration of principles. It was passed by 89 votes to 15 with 10 abstentions.

The irony of the bitter fighting in which the conference floundered to an end is that the Group of 77 defeated its own objective.

The Group of 77, actually 113, was formed in 1964 by developing countries to work for a new international economic order. Early in the conference, the group chucked out the declaration of principles, prepared in advance by the United Nations, and substituted its own version of this document.

The main plank of the rewrite was to be a demand for a new economic order. But the more radical members of the group also wanted to include a resolution equating Zionism with racism, an echo of the UN resolution that startled the world last year.

This racism resolution was written in and out of the document several times during the conference. At one stage of the game, the controversial words were removed from the document and the Vancouver Province exulted that the UN “appeared on the verge of a major breakthrough” with the Iraqi amendment on racism “struck down.”

The immediate result, according to a source in the Israeli delegation, was that the Iraq delegates stormed into the next meeting waving the offending headline and literally shouting with rage. So back into the document went the racist resolution.

Therefore, when the time came to vote on the Declaration of Principles, there was no consensus because of this paragraph. Delegation after delegation, explaining their vote, said they were forced to abstain or vote no only because of the controversial paragraph.

So the Group of 77 lost its chance for almost unanimous support of a UN demand for a new international economic order.

Danson, who was conference president, believes that only 15 words (the equation of Zionism with racism) prevented the conference from reaching unanimous agreement.

But that's not quite so. America [USA] did make it quite clear that several paragraphs in the final declaration, specifically those dealing with the new economic order, the U.S. could not have approved. And that's probably why the U.S. used a tricky ploy in the final hours of the conference to ensure that they were not left alone in a corner as the bad boys.

In a move that Hugh Keenleyside, Habitat's assistant commissioner-general, denounced Monday as a “straight double cross,” the U.S. broke a promise to its Western allies and proposed that the document be voted on as a whole rather than paragraph by paragraph.

But no one has yet asked why Danson accepted this U.S. proposal so quietly—there was no vote on it. And why did no other Western country object?

It makes one wonder if such things as hunger (there had been so dinner break) and fatigue (the prospect of arguing through the night) made Canada's allies sit on their hands and accept the U.S. shafting without protest.

One of Danson's aides described the U.S. tactics as a brilliant move—if you happen to be [U.S.] American—because it forced the West to line up together.

"So the U.S. wasn't isolated—it didn't end up as the U.S. against the rest of the world," said the aide. "We and Australia and several other countries worked hard to get that declaration voted on paragraph by paragraph."

Yet despite these sneaky tactics, the aide did not think the U.S. was really taking the conference seriously. For instance, they voted in favor of a resolution clearly intended to criticize the U.S. presence in Panama. If the U.S. had really cared, he said, they would have fought that resolution like tigers.

Although the Israeli-Arab bitterness was behind much of the Group of 77 maneuvering, not all members of the group felt the same way. Many South American countries are quite moderate about Israel, but some of the Asians, such as the Philippines, and a few of the Africans were deeply into the political game playing.

When the Group of 77 had its first Habitat meeting, only 14 countries took part, but that number zoomed to 60 when the media became aware of the secret meetings.

In the Western camp, Canada could always count on help from the British, the Dutch and the Scandinavians. But France and West Germany were careful not to do anything to offend the Americans.

Danson's staff were particularly annoyed by the allegations of some UN staff made within minutes of the conference ending that the minister bombed his chairman's job through inexperience.

They point out that the senior UN legal adviser to Habitat took off for Rome at the start of the second week and left only his junior behind in Vancouver.

"Then, when the conference was over, the UN came out like a bunch of vultures," said one staffer. The truth is that no one could have turned the conference around by the time the intransigents had got out in front of the Group of 77.

Some very sophisticated political maneuvering was going on in the Palestine Liberation Organization camp and the Iraqis had some very procedural people.

On the last day but one, both sides refused to negotiate further. So, in Canadian eyes, there was nothing left to lose when Danson made his emotional plea to the delegates to quit their political squabbling for the sake of the children.

But it's doubtful whether the most eloquent man in the world could have prevented the Israeli-PLO bitterness. In retrospect, Vancouver City Council's hysteria about violence in the street was more naive than anything else.

The PLO, with official UN observer status, was not going to start chucking bombs at the back door of the conference when it had every right to walk in the front door. And it used its official status with great skill, lobbying behind the scenes to get no less than four anti-Israeli resolutions pushed through the conference in the course of two weeks.

What was frightening to an observer of the Arab-Israeli clash was the inflexibility and paranoia of both sides. The PLO is so totally absorbed in its hatred of the Israelis that it even claimed the turning on of the lights during their film show was a Zionist plot.

The conference call for clean water for all human settlements by 1990 sounds great. But what chance it has of becoming reality will be much clearer next year when the UN holds a water conference in Argentina in March.

And, as was pointed out by environment ecosystem director Letitia Obeng, clean water can only be achieved in Third World countries when there are latrines in every community and people have been taught to use them. That in itself is a monumental engineering and educational task.

Few Canadians seem to appreciate the incredible nature of Justice Minister Ron Basford's commitment to clean up Canadian water by 1980. That's only four years away and yet we have polluted Canadian waters all the way from the Okanagan Valley to Grassy Narrows, Ont. If Basford meant what he said, the cleanup is going to be very fast and expensive.

A Habitat disappointment before the conference opened was the nonappearance of China. A country with one-fifth of the world population [that] has apparently solved a massive human settlements problem in a comparatively few years would have been an enormous asset to the conference, but China never even bothered to reply to the UN invitation.

Disappointing at the end of the conference was the failure to reach agreement about the location of a new UN agency on human settlements and its institutional set up. This subject was shunted aside to the UN General Assembly meeting in the fall and, judging from the bitter debate this subject produced at Habitat, it's going to be a tough decision.

For Canada, the fall will also bring a post-Habitat moment of truth. Four follow-up events are scheduled including a meeting of NGOs and a federal-provincial conference of housing ministers. That's when we will find out if Habitat was just words or a real beginning to improve our human settlements.

Photo: Main Habitat Forum pavilion with its Native Pacific Coast-inspired mural by Bill Reid (1976).