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Beyond Habitat

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Introduction

I had never lived in a house before. Habitat was the first.

It was what I always imagined living in a house could be, and yet it wasn't a house as we know it. There were things happening around us all the time. We lived in a way we could have lived only in a big house in a fancy suburb; and yet we did things we could have done only in an apartment on, say, Sherbrooke Street in downtown Montreal, or Fifth Avenue in New York. We had both.

The wonderful thing about living in Habitat during Expo 67 was that it was exactly the way I envisaged it to be – a community, almost rural in nature, *in the city*. People were around you in great numbers; not only those who lived there, but all those who were visiting Expo. There were shops, and there were movie theaters, and there were exhibits and parks and fountains, and there were ships docked in front with people coming to visit the city, and there were all the elements that make a good city.

And yet with all those millions of people, when you closed the door, you were in your own house. You had privacy; you really were alone. You looked out at the view and you were not aware of the crowds of people surrounding you even though they were there by the millions. You had a feeling of seclusion, of quiet. Never in all the months I lived there did I hear a neighbor through the walls or the floors. We would wake up in the morning and open the sliding doors and we would have breakfast in the garden. Our children would open the front door, get on their tricycles and ride down the pedestrian street to the playground, meet other kids and become friends with them, continue playing half the day there and throughout the structure outside our house. We had a dog and we could take him for a long walk right outside our door.

These things, I suppose, would have been possible if we had been living on a quiet residential street in a suburb such as Westmount, with our own house and garden. We could have gone out and had breakfast in the garden and so on.

There was nothing unique about it except that we happened to be *on the tenth floor, in an environment that had ten times the density of Westmount.*

But in Westmount, if you wanted to go and see a film or go to a library, or even if you wanted to go to work, you would either have to get in your car or get on a bus or subway. In Habitat during Expo you went down ten floors and you were together with fifty thousand people. You could see the best movies, go on to a visiting ship docked close to the building and join the party, eat in any of dozens of good restaurants.

That mixture of being in the busiest, most crowded urban meeting place and, at the same time, a hundred feet away, going through a door and being alone in your house, was an incredible experience. This sense of seclusion was achieved by the fact that the houses were free in space: they all opened in three or four directions. From some windows you saw the city, from others the river or Expo. You had morning sun in some rooms, sun in the evening in other rooms, and you felt the sun going round you all day.

Everything about it gave me the feeling of *house* and yet it gave me all the other things I had always wanted in a house but never found in the isolation of the anonymous suburb.