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Beyond Habitat

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A number of large architectural firms that had experience of joint ventures with other designers were considered by Expo. The firm of John B. Parkin Associates was proposed. I met with John C. Parkin, the partner in charge of design, and told him what my terms were. He told me his, and they seemed acceptable. I made it clear: I had commitments to Komendant as an engineer; I had people who were to remain in positions of responsibility, Dave Rinehart particularly; I wanted full design control of the building; all decisions for hiring engineers and other consultants would be made jointly and so on. The agreements were outlined in a letter, but we had not signed a contract. We agreed that the work should be done in Montreal. They were to send people down from their Toronto office.

But the Parkin people just didn't show up. I was getting nervous and started hiring my own. In a short time I hired twenty people. I then found problems were arising with their office.

It appeared that John B. Parkin, the senior partner, felt differently about some of the points we had agreed upon. I had prepared a contract which he found unacceptable. He felt they ought to do the engineering. I was nervous about that because of rumors that there had been friction between Parkin and Viljo Revell over the Toronto city hall on this point, and because I felt a moral and practical commitment to Komendant.

They felt uneasy about some of the people in my office because they had long hair or didn't wear suits. The office had evolved to a relaxed, unregimented place. I didn't feel an architect, a professional, should get his time sheet signed every evening he was going to work overtime. I felt it was up to him. These small things became important.

I went back to Expo and said I couldn't continue with Parkin. I assume Parkin also went to Expo. All around, they must have felt the entire project much too

risky. Expo said the decision was mine to make but they felt it would help them, and the job, to have me associated with a reputable firm, even for such purposes as professional insurance. I had no objection to that. I had hoped in fact, that a joint venture would help me in dealing with administrative matters, running an office, finances, and so on. But it didn't work out that way. In the final analysis it was good. By the time those three months of negotiations were over, I found I had built up an office of my own. I was independent. Expo said they would be perfectly willing if I associated with another firm.

At that point I met Peter Barott of David, Barott, Boulva, a Montreal firm. I made very clear what my terms were—exactly the same terms I had made with John C. Parkin. They accepted them and that was the beginning of our rather good relationship.

Anthony Peters, who had been one of the original team of eight, was appointed Expo's representative for Habitat. He was in effect "the client." His official title was "Section Head—Habitat," directly under Edouard Fiset, Expo's chief architect.

I first met Tony Peters when he was working part-time for Harold Spence-Sales. Tony is an Englishman who came to Canada about 1958. He went to work for Sandy van Ginkel when I left for Philadelphia. When van Ginkel became involved in Expo his whole staff moved over, and so when I went to Expo in 1963 Tony was there on van Ginkel's team. Tony sat in on our weekly job meetings, and processed the endless flow of paper work. Later on, when Habitat was completed, he was given the job of running it as an exhibit. Now he's working for Sandy van Ginkel again.

Tony has a very shrewd understanding of the total structure of things; he understands the politics of a situation. He had a difficult task with Habitat because, though we were friends, he had the responsibility of saying, "Stop doing that, it's going to go over the budget." He was constantly subject to all the Expo pressures and I am grateful he managed to shield me from so many. He was involved in situations where federal and provincial agencies were constantly questioning the project and he had to deal with that volatile energetic group of people who made up our office.

The office was new and I was twenty-five. Everything had to be learned the hard way. Since I already had a substantial staff, David, Barott, Boulva put on only three or four people, in a team of about thirty. Again this was all for the better in terms of independence. There was no attempt to take over the job. Their firm was very busy with its own work. They were pleased to give whatever assistance they could, but did not feel possessive about Habitat.

About that time we had an eventful visit. The Habitat design drawings had just been completed and released by Expo to the press and we were starting our working drawings. One day I received a call from one of the public relations

people at Expo: "Could I come by? I have a visitor here and I would like to show him your model and drawings." The visitor turned out to be a small bald man with large glasses who in some ways, in the intense communion of meeting his eyes through the lenses, made me think of Lou Kahn. The PR man said, "May I introduce to you Mr. Buckminster Fuller. He's the one who designs the domes, you know." I directed the PR man to the two or three Fuller books on my shelf. (I had been interested in Fuller's ideas and writings since university.) Everybody in the office of course became very excited, and I took Fuller to where the models and drawings were and started describing the project to him. After I had spoken for maybe three minutes he said, "You need say no more. I understand what it's all about." He added something to the effect that he appreciated how difficult it was to get it that far. Then he left.

I didn't hear from Fuller again directly until a year later. Expo had just opened and his U.S. pavilion was a big hit. I received a letter from him and attached to it was a press clipping from the Toronto *Telegram*. The heading of the article was, "Buckminster Fuller Blasts Habitat, Pats Himself on Own Dome." Fuller's letter started: "I'm sure you will agree with me that it is not a pleasant thing to call any man a liar, but this reporter is a liar." His letter went on to tell me how he felt about my work. At that time I was subject to considerable criticism from many in my profession, and the letter was a very important reinforcer of morale. (I was to meet Fuller again and spend considerable time with him in Israel in 1967 during the International Congress of Engineers and Architects. We went to Jerusalem and several other places together.)

It's a strange thing to say about a man who is known mainly as an architect and builder, but if I have a political mentor it is Buckminster Fuller.

We completed the preliminary working drawings and the first cost estimates came in. They were around seventy million dollars, compared with the expected forty-two million! We started making modifications to bring it back down to forty-two million. That meant we had to cut out thirty million dollars' worth of construction, nearly half the estimates. But it wasn't quite as bad as it sounds. The seventy million was a rough first estimate, and they are usually very conservative. We went over the plans and estimates, discovering where and why they were priced so high, refined the design, made it more efficient. We also simplified some things: the pedestrian streets were to be heated and enclosed in plastic, so we changed the enclosures to shelters, and eliminated the heating; the elevators were changed. We did a whole lot of things like that and brought the estimates back to the original figure.

We were still searching for money. On the initiative of Expo and the development consultants, Andrews and Bell, I made nearly a presentation a day for two months until we had seen the presidents of virtually every large corporation in the country: William Zeckendorf who came in from New York, the presidents of the Royal Bank, Montreal Trust, General Motors of Canada, Stelco, Inco, Alcan, Domtar, Imperial Oil, Power Corporation and many others.

The exposure the idea was getting was incredible, and as a result three offers came in. Power Corporation put in writing that if given the ship-building formula tax write-off, it would be prepared to build the whole project. A subsidiary of Imperial Oil also made an offer, and so did Lionel Rudberg, the developer responsible for CIL House and some large apartment buildings in Montreal.

With these three letters, the working drawings, and the cost estimates made by the Foundation Company of Canada we set off for Ottawa – Shaw, Churchill and their staff; Andrews; Fraser Elliott, a noted tax lawyer; and myself, packed in a small two-engine chartered plane – for a meeting with the Cabinet committee. I remember Churchill saying on the way there, “You’re twenty-five and you’re going to make a presentation to the Cabinet of this country. Isn’t that absolutely wonderful?” and he meant it. It was a great experience, a great moment.

Mitchell Sharp was the minister in charge of Expo. The presentation was made to him; several other ministers were there as well as people from CMHC. It was well received as a concept. I think it excited everybody. I remember Jean-Luc Pépin, then parliamentary secretary to Mitchell Sharp, shaking my hand and saying something especially warm. Those present felt it would be good for the country and good for Expo. But the power house at the meeting proved to be Robert Bryce, the deputy minister of Finance. What he said amounted to: “We don’t think we want to make a precedent by using the ship-building formula. What would you do if you were just given a straight budget of ten million dollars?”

I said it would be absolutely impossible. Half of the ten-million-dollar budget would be spent building the prefabricating plant and tooling up before construction started. That would leave only five million for construction. We couldn’t build more than about a hundred and fifty housing units – a very small number. The unit cost would be astronomical, triple the proposed unit cost for the original proposal. What was more, we couldn’t get amenities to support such a small population, and it would become an isolated community.

At the time I didn’t think the project would be reduced in size. I repeatedly stated it was impossible to reduce it. Bryce said, “Well, that’s too bad, because that may mean the thing is dead.” (I think the decision was made very shortly after not to apply the ship-building formula, but I didn’t find out until later.)

Chatting in the plane on the way back, Bob Shaw jokingly asked, “If they say ‘No’, what will you do?” I said, “I’ll come back to Expo and get involved with the master plan again.” Nobody really knew what would happen. Our spirits were high but we were quite tense.

Meanwhile we went on with the work in more detail, studying and refining toward the final working drawings. Two months later I was called into Churchill’s office. Churchill said, “We’ve got instructions from the Treasury Board. They are not prepared to go with the formula. They are offering ten

million dollars for construction and one and one-half million for design and development. They want to see what we can do for it and if they are satisfied we'll get a go-ahead with that budget."

I was in a state of shock. It had never occurred to me through the whole struggle that my project would not be accepted in its entirety. I was convinced of its feasibility and had an obsessed sense of the inevitability of its realization. The set-back took me completely by surprise. Had I expected it, it might have been easier to understand.

My immediate reaction was, "I won't do it, it would be irresponsible." For two or three days I just sat at home, went out to the movies, drifted. We had been working at a hysterical pace, and of course nobody in the office was aware of what was happening. I couldn't bring myself to tell them.

Thinking about it afterwards, pondering that unanswerable "Why?" I believe there were a number of reasons that influenced the government to decide on a modified version. Anything above ten or fifteen million dollars would have required an arrangement with private enterprise and they were not going to enter any such joint venture. Their final decision was safer.

To give money for housing is a dangerous thing politically. I was told after that Cabinet presentation: "If you would only call it an exhibit we would have no trouble, but being housing it's a problem." A government could have voted fifty million dollars for a tower or a symbol or an exhibit and there would have been no difficulty but the same money voted for housing – even housing research – became a major political problem. If they gave housing to Montreal even within the context of an exhibition, then why not to other cities? A pavilion that happened to be a housing exhibit was, they decided, politically easier. As it turned out it was not. It still got all the criticism, all the attacks that are always made whenever government gets involved in any form of housing.

Another factor that I prefer not to think about too much, but I'm sure was very immediate, was that while I was working on the original Habitat proposal, Montreal's Mayor Drapeau came up with his proposal for the Paris/Montreal thousand-foot tower that was to cost forty-two million dollars – exactly the same as Habitat. Drapeau was spending most of his energies in those days trying to get it going, and I'm quite sure the City, which was a major partner in Expo, wasn't pushing Habitat; they were pushing the tower. They thought of the tower as the major symbol of the exhibition, as an Eiffel Tower or Seattle Needle, even though it ignored the Montebello conference decision. Habitat too was thought of by those who supported it – particularly in its original form – as a major symbol of Expo. I'm sure Churchill and Shaw felt it was; they said as much. You couldn't have two major symbols. Well, you could, but it was unlikely. There certainly wasn't enough money going around to do both. I feel that this distraction of Mayor Drapeau while pursuing the tower was at least indirectly responsible for Ottawa's decision.

The conflict between Habitat and the tower came up again later when the City called for bids on the tower at the same time that bids were called for Habitat Phase One. Most of the large contractors in town had to decide whether to bid the tower or Habitat. They couldn't do both. So Anglin-Norcross and the Foundation Company chose to bid Habitat and other contractors bid the tower.

Everyone in Expo became either Habitat-supporters or Habitat-haters. There was no neutrality. The ratio was two to one against. Churchill's secretary, Yoland Beaumier, was one of the supporters. I told her I wasn't going to do the reduced version and she gave me a long lecture about how ridiculous that was, the government didn't care about the unit cost, why should I? I went into Churchill's office after that and got another lecture from him. I could prove most of the things I wanted to prove, he said. It still had the scale to live as a community.

I felt very low. I realized that even though I could announce once a day for the next five years that the unit cost had been tripled by cutting the project's size, it would not be listened to. People would keep pointing at the unit costs and saying, "The concept is ridiculous because of the unit cost." No amount of explanation would be able to overcome that kind of criticism.

I insisted that if we built a small Habitat, the balance of the land on MacKay Pier had to be zoned for housing and commercial use so that after Expo the community could be completed. I could not envisage a hundred and sixty families being isolated there. So few people can't have a school, can't support shops – and if the National Harbours Board were to take it over and build warehouses next to it the thing would become a complete nightmare. I didn't care if the future extension would be designed as Habitat as long as people lived there. The zoning was agreed to. Then, after great inner deliberation, I decided to do it.