

The furnishing of Habitat was a story in itself. To me it was an expression of a deeply rooted problem, the way people set their values and judge their environment. Furniture is so close to people that they react to it very emotionally.

From the beginning I knew we would run into problems when it came time to furnish the exhibit units, and so, in negotiating my contract with Expo I insisted on a clause that gave us design authority over the furnishing of all the areas in the building that were open to the public. At the time Expo didn't give much thought to that requirement, put it in the contract, and signed it, so there it was.

As opening day approached it became clear that nobody in Expo was organizing Habitat as an exhibit. I approached Churchill about it and it was made clear to me that Expo had no budget and was not intending to spend any money furnishing Habitat. Fair enough. We had to get the best we could by begging. We recommended to Expo that an industrial designer who knew the industry be retained as consultant and suggested Jacques Guillon of Montreal, who was doing considerable work for Expo at the time. Guillon thought it would be worth approaching the best designers from several countries participating in Expo to do a few units each. This was going beyond our terms of reference. We were not authorized to negotiate with foreign governments but, ignoring the restriction, we went directly to commercial attachés or ambassadors. Churchill, I suspect, knew what we were doing.

The response was fantastic. Before we knew it, we had Denmark committed to doing eight houses, England wanted to do three, Japan wanted two, and there were others. Everything was going beautifully. We went back to Churchill and gave him a cheerful report saying in effect that we'd got it all solved. The report went from Churchill to Expo management and then things absolutely blew up.

The Canadian Furniture Manufacturers' Association heard that there was

voluntary participation from other countries. They couldn't see, they said, how a project that was part of the national effort could be given to foreigners. Robert Winters, as cabinet minister in charge of Expo, seemed to agree with them and instructed Expo to inform the countries that Habitat was a Canadian exhibit, to be done by Canadians. This was very embarrassing, because by that time some of the foreign representatives had met with Shaw and Churchill and been given commitments to proceed. Somehow Expo had to turn round and change it all.

Two weeks later the International Bureau of Exhibitions met in Moscow. Members criticized Pierre Dupuy and Andrew Kniewasser, Expo's general manager, saying that this was no way to run an international exhibition. Kniewasser, who's great at pleading this kind of case, made the point that after all Habitat was an all-Canadian effort, Habitat was a theme exhibit, wouldn't the countries oblige by withdrawing? (That was the first time anybody adopted Habitat as a theme exhibit, incidentally. In the previous two years the theme exhibits department would have nothing to do with it.) There the row subsided: the countries did nothing more about it and Canada was left to handle the furnishings.

Next the Department of Exhibits, which was responsible for going after sponsorship, was given the task of handling the furnishing project. They decided we should have nothing to do with it. When I heard that, I wrote a letter to Churchill reminding him of the design control clause in our contract. Nothing happened. The Department of Exhibits formed a special advisory group of representatives of the furniture industry. At their first meeting I was asked to brief them. I said Habitat was a house that related to contemporary Canadian life. It had to be furnished with regard and respect for the kind of life we lead, for the space we have, for the maintenance we can keep up with. It wasn't just a matter of displaying floor tiles and fabrics, American Colonial versus French Provincial. It had to have some meaning in terms of contemporary Canadian life.

Realizing that the committee was going to use Habitat as a catalogue, we tried another approach. Guillon and I lunched with the chairman of the furniture manufacturers' committee. We asked if he would be willing to have half the units done by Canadian manufacturers and the other half by the designers from various countries. He said he would consider the suggestion, but right after the meeting, he put pressure on to kill the idea. In subsequent meetings of the committee, from which I was barred, there was a good deal of indignation that Guillon and I should consider we had any right to say how Habitat should be furnished. Most of the members of that association manufacture for the mass department store market. Most of the manufacturers of, let's call it, "consciously designed furniture" are not members.

Then the committee offered to furnish all twenty-six exhibit units free on condition that *Chatelaine* magazine be given the sole responsibility for designing them. *Chatelaine* is a Canadian women's fashion and household

magazine. The Department of Exhibits was delighted: "We've solved the problem of Habitat!" The commitment was made. The industry was delighted: the design responsibility was to be in the hands of a magazine they all advertise in.

I was sending registered letters and telegrams to Shaw and Churchill and at one point I got sufficiently upset to send a telegram to the chairman of the National Design Council, John C. Parkin. I wrote: "I request the Council's assistance and help in trying to get Habitat furnished in a way that is compatible with the standards of the National Design Council." (In the end the Council failed to make a single firm resolution on the subject.) When Expo management heard of that, they hit the roof. How dare I consult a federal agency over their head! I answered that design control was in my contract and if *Chatelaine* were given the design of the units I would try to stop it by court injunction. This was very painful for me because I was in effect attacking Churchill and Shaw, people who were close to me and to whom I was indebted. Expo's exhibits department argued that we surely couldn't get Habitat furnished the way I wanted free and consequently they'd rather have bad furniture than no furniture. I said I'd rather have no furniture than bad furniture. Let people look at the units empty!

I was quite convinced, however, that we could get the best designers in the country, and the manufacturers they worked with, to furnish the units in Habitat free. Guillon and I made a list of some of Canada's finest designers and manufacturers: Dudas Kuypers Rowan, Bob Kaiser, Christen Sorensen, Guillon himself, and others. We approached them on our own and asked if they would do one or two units each, free, working with their usual manufacturers. We hoped they would be able to custom-design prototypical furniture for the project as an exhibit. We got positive response from enough to do twenty-two units.

When we returned to Expo with that proposal the battle went wild, for now Expo was in an even more embarrassing position. We had managed to sign up the best designers in the country, most of whom were already doing work for Expo: Dudas Kuypers Rowan were designing the whole Man the Producer pavilion, for instance.

Meanwhile *Chatelaine* made its first presentation. It was the most vulgar, ugly, bargain-basement stuff, pettily concocted. I just couldn't believe my eyes. I couldn't believe that what I saw there was being seriously proposed for an international exhibition. We said, "Either they are dismissed or we'll have a press conference and say exactly what we think." Expo was nervous about the damaging effect. They suspected I might leak the whole thing to the press and talk about going to court. They could just see the press picking it up, the headlines, a lot of editorial criticism, little programs on CBC, and so on. Things were getting too hot to bear.

Churchill then called in *Chatelaine's* man in charge, a representative of the committee, and me one Saturday morning and said, "We're not leaving this

room until we settle this matter.” At the end of a long day, I was offered a compromise. *Chatelaine* was to do half and we were to have a free hand with the other half. It was two or three months before the opening of Expo. I concluded that if half was done by *Chatelaine* and half by the designers we selected, at least people would have a basis for comparison and that in itself might be interesting. So I agreed, and that’s the way it was done. In the end when people came to Habitat they knew the difference.

The politics of the *Chatelaine* affair are really an expression of a fundamental cultural issue – an expression of the thought processes and the considerations that individuals apply in planning their house, their furnishings, and the nature of their shelter.

Many of those who understood very well why the building shouldn’t be painted, or why we should not compromise in the construction process, or why each house should have a garden, did not understand as clearly or as simply why we should not have pseudo-American Colonial furniture, or why there was more to furnishing the Habitat exhibit than a furniture advertising campaign. Instead they put the issue in terms of contemporary versus traditional, not the quality of the environment that could be made.

In fact, when the first *Chatelaine* submission was made I was asked to make comments on it. I was told not to put it on the basis of “don’t like” or “do like,” not to put it on the basis of contemporary and non-contemporary, and I accepted that. This was an opportunity to try and state where a design submission did or didn’t meet what I felt were the needs of a workable house. I wrote things like: “This chair is too big for this room.” “This chest does not make sense in relationship to the space available.” “This particular object blocks the view.” “This color scheme breaks up the continuity of the house and makes the rooms appear smaller.” “Wallpaper over beams and pilasters destroys the clarity of expression of the structural system of the building, which one wants to comprehend when one is in one’s house.” It had nothing to do with whether they were contemporary or non-contemporary.

Why do people design their own environment so badly, so devoid of anything that has to do with the way they live? Why should a middle-income Canadian family living in Habitat choose furniture that is an imitation of something that was designed for a totally different set of circumstances, for a room that may have been eighteen feet high, or made during a time when furniture was hand-carved wood? Today it’s mass-produced by machine. We have a wealth of materials that can give us good furniture.

The whole furniture affair was an expression of how arbitrary the design of our houses is, how much our decisions are shaped not by how we use and live in a house, but by secondary associations: associations with what we consider to represent “belonging,” success, status, impressing our friends. Style and fashion are directly proportional to the degree of arbitrariness in the design,

and they increase as the object becomes more irrational or as it is increasingly motivated by considerations that are not the primary reasons for the existence of that object.

I've been asked a hundred times: "What style do you furnish your house in?" or "Do you like Modern?" The trouble with the question is that it expresses the idea that there are a number of equally valid alternatives and therefore it is a matter of personal choice which you select: French Provincial or Cape Cod Colonial; Spanish-American or Modern – Modern being an equal partner with the others, just another stylistic vocabulary. That assumption is fundamentally wrong. There are not that many equally valid choices. Style, which is a formalized vocabulary, has very little to do with the question, "What is a house all about?" When I think about furnishing a house, many questions come to my mind:

What is the family's style of life?

Is the furniture comfortable to sit on or lie on or eat at in terms of their living habits?

Are the materials cold, such as metal or stone? Are they warm to touch, such as wool or wood? What is the climate?

Is the furniture related to the size of the space?

Is the quality of the material such that it absorbs dirt or is it easily cleanable?

Does it lend itself to easy maintenance, or does it consume much energy to clean and keep tidy?

Is the maintenance of the house related to the style of life?

Is the furniture flexible enough, in terms of the way certain rooms are used during different times of the day and night?

If the family moves frequently, is the furniture light and easy to transport?

Process comes into it too:

Is the furniture made with the kind of processes and materials that would make it economical and therefore easily available to the family?

What materials lend themselves to such processes?

All the above is concerned primarily with physical aspects but there are many psychological considerations too:

What is the emotional import of the colors of all surfaces?

What do the colors and textures of the walls and floors do to the perceiving of the space; do they make it feel smaller or bigger?

Do the textures and colors of the walls reflect light from the outside; do they create brightness and less dependency on artificial light?

All these questions come to mind when somebody asks me, "Do you like Modern?" I don't know how to answer that question. I don't know if my house is Modern. I've designed furniture for my own house, selected things to put in it,

but nevertheless the question of Modern or not Modern has never entered my mind. When people ask what style of furniture one likes, they are ignoring most of the questions that I raised.

“Do *you* like modern furniture?” Much so-called modern furniture does not respond to the hundreds of demands which we make on furniture. Many people say, “I don’t like Modern because it is cold.”

Such an irrelevant approach is responsible for ridiculous situations. Often it is a negation of the nature of the object. For example, if a man living in Bombay puts down a thick wool carpet which is going to get moldy with the humidity and which is going to be uncomfortable in the heat, it’s a negation of the nature of the floor in his house. A man living in Montreal or in Scotland who puts in a marble or stone floor which absorbs a great deal of heat and therefore feels very cold is equally doing something that contradicts the nature of the object. What makes an Indian in Bombay carpet his house with thick wool carpets? I suppose he’s seen it in *Life* magazine, he has feelings of admiration for a style of life that isn’t his. By carpeting his house he’s able to feel he has upgraded himself, and he’s prepared to suffer the carpet’s moldy heat.

The same is true of our clothes. Women’s fashions are quite unrelated to climate or to comfort. If you watch a woman walking on a really pointy high heel, as they did not long ago, it’s the most inorganic thing you can think of. The whole thing is shaking and about to collapse at any moment. Half the woman’s weight is concentrated on one little heel one-quarter of an inch square, which penetrates practically every flooring material we know. Four years later the same woman couldn’t consider in her worst dreams wearing the same shoe, because it’s out of fashion. Men are no better. We wear wool suits and ties in a hot climate and it becomes so unbearable that we have to create micro-climates inside buildings with air conditioning.

Fashion is a diversionary tactic because it makes it possible to concentrate energy on something which is not the environmental issue. In other cultures this has not always been true. Arab dress is very much related to the climate. It hasn’t changed for thousands of years. It’s comfortable in that climate, comfortable for walking, easily washable. The Indian sari also hasn’t changed for thousands of years and I think it evolved for organic, environmental reasons.

As a matter of personal taste we select things that please us. The choice is not logical but they obviously have a place in our house. If they didn’t, many houses would be identical. A house should be unique, as unique as one’s face or personality, it should not be irrational. It is paradoxical when people make decisions for reasons that are in contradiction to rational environment.

I was prepared to choose any number of designers in the country and give them a free hand in furnishing Habitat. But the ideal would be real tenants

doing their own places rather than having them “decorated.” Habitat was not supposed to be an expression of my personal way of life, but an expression of certain values, one of which is, that the way we make things and do things in our own culture is meaningful. Today we consider as objets d’art what past cultures simply made for daily life. Utensils, clothes, buildings, music – they were part of a ritual of life and the process of life. The Greeks made things for use in daily life and the art in them is the art of the people expressed in making them, not art for art’s sake. Today we have a whole world of manufactured things that make up our environment, lamps, tables, carpets, cars, clothes, airplanes, suitcases. There – as the Bauhaus taught us – is the root of art. Most of what comes under the heading *art* today, painting, sculpture, means very little to me. Objects I use mean so much more.

There is a pretentiousness in our culture. We ignore or degrade the things that should give art to our life, and create a subculture of so-called art that is irrelevant. If we put our energies into thinking about the things that we really use in our lives we would be producing what we admire so much in other cultures.

That was the real conflict with *Chatelaine*, a conflict between two basically different attitudes to life.

After the meeting in Churchill’s office I had no further contact with them. One day a few weeks later I arrived at the site and there was an enormous eight-foot sphere made out of papier-mâché with funny holes in it, pink and lime in color. It looked like the cut-up kidneys of a Martian. I asked what it was and was told *Chatelaine* had just delivered it. It was a play sculpture for the playground. A manufacturer had donated it. I said, “Over my dead body!” That same day I tried to get Churchill to have them remove it, but he was away. So Nina and I went down that night. There was that enormous thing sitting on the moonlit plaza. The only thing to do was roll it out of the building. I started pushing it and it made a big racket. Suddenly, four security guards jumped out from one of the houses and one of them grabbed me as if I were trying to steal the thing. He said, “What are you doing?” I said, “I’m the architect of this building, I’m moving this thing out of the place.” They asked for identification and called the chief of security for Expo, who soon arrived with siren wailing. They were sure they had caught a thief. In the end, they didn’t lock me up. But it took two weeks of continuous phone calls and pleading to get Expo to instruct *Chatelaine* to take it off the site.





This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001)

# Beyond Habitat

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## Citation:

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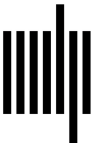
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262368049

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 1970

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.



The MIT Press

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Published simultaneously in Canada by Tundra Books of Montreal  
and in the United States of America by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

First MIT Press paperback edition, January 1973

Second printing, November 1973

ISBN 0 262 19083 4 (hard)

ISBN 0 262 69036 5 (paper)

Library of Congress catalog card number: 76-130455

Printed in Canada

The production of this book took place in Montreal.

Design was by Rolf Harder, Design Collaborative.

Photographs appearing in this book were taken by the following:

Jerry Spearman of Media Extensions, N.Y.C.; The *Montreal Star*–Canada Wide; Keith Oliver; Kero;  
Official Expo photographers; Moshe Safdie.

Figure 25 courtesy of The New Yorker magazine. Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

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Text was computer set in 10/12 Helvetica by Fast Photo Typesetters of Canada and the printout made on a Fototronic Model 1200. Films for the album of photographs were prepared by Klaus Unterberger.

The Enver Azizi cartoon was translated from the Spanish by William Weiss.

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