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Beyond Habitat

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OA Funding Provided By:

National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon
Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/1575.001.0001)

Back in Habitat, D-Day was coming very close, and it was very difficult to believe that the building would ever be ready in time.

It's amazing how *unfinished* a building can look five days before completion. One week before the opening of Expo, while tenants were moving into some of the units and furniture was arriving, the building was covered with construction garbage and debris. The site was still full of equipment, the area surrounding the building was terraced but piled up with dirt. You couldn't believe it would be ready in time. The last four days were a transformation. Garbage was removed by the ton, the equipment got hauled out – twenty-four-hour shifts, people coming in and out. Two days before opening an army of gardeners arrived with truckloads of sod and right in front of our eyes the whole thing changed in forty-eight hours. By the opening the grass was all green, the planting was all in, the streets were swept clean, the building was finished. It was just incredible. There were hundreds of deficiencies, little things that had to be done, but you didn't see them. You saw the finished building.

On D-Day – April 27, 1967 – the building opened. No one, including myself, had believed that Habitat would be ready in time. The fact that it looked so unfinished up to the last moment was responsible for a lot of hysteria and concern.

Nina and I moved to Habitat one day after the opening. I was personally so busy with the completion that the whole business of moving and getting furniture designed or bought was very much neglected. We lived for a month with hardly any furniture.

In the first place, we had not intended to move into Habitat. Our first thought was that the rent was too high and it just didn't make sense for us to move. We were living then in a duplex on Pine Avenue in downtown Montreal. At one point Expo decided that Mr. Dupuy ought to have two apartments combined into a sort of a royal residence made up of four boxes on the eleventh and

twelfth floors looking out in four directions. So the unit that had been originally reserved for him became vacant. That was only a few months before the opening. At that point we decided to take advantage of the available unit and that we would indeed move in. For one thing, the rent during Expo would be a business expense, and the other factor was that, by that time, Expo had received a report recommending that post-Expo rents be forty per cent below rents during Expo. We felt we could afford those rents after Expo, so we could rationalize the higher rent for our apartment during the exhibition period itself.

Two months before the opening I received a call from Ottawa saying that Prime Minister Lester Pearson had decided to have an apartment in Habitat and would I make mine available. We had by then ordered our furniture, most of which was to be built in. I was nevertheless inclined to say, "Yes," but then another suitable unit was found for him on the third floor. The Prime Minister always stayed in Habitat when he was in Montreal during Expo.

There was not much of a ceremony when the building was finished except an informal party given by the general contractor, for the people who actually worked on the building. But, finishing Habitat was really part of finishing Expo and, on opening night, there was a big party in the main hall of Place Bonaventure with several rock bands, light shows and thousands of people. It was a real swinging party.

From the first, Habitat was a great public success. The newspapers raved about it. The flow of people through the building averaged something like thirty thousand people a day, in the six months of Expo a total of seven million. There was a constant stream of dignitaries and officials, many of whom I saw, some of whom I didn't.

I continually got calls from the Expo visitors' service: "Governor Rockefeller of New York is here, will you please take him through the building . . . The U.S. Secretary of Housing is here," etc. I took Rockefeller through, I took Secretary of Housing Weaver through, but eventually I decided that work had to go on and I just couldn't continue doing it, except for very special cases. Among the professional writers I saw were Wolf Von Eckardt, writing for the *Washington Post*, Ada Louise Huxtable of the *New York Times*, David Jacobs who wrote for the *New York Times* magazine and for *Horizon*, and novelist Penelope Mortimer who was writing for the *Sunday Times* in London.

Tony Peters, in his new capacity as exhibit director, took over the hosting of notables through the building: a list that included Earl Mountbatten, Princess Margaret, General de Gaulle, Lady Bird Johnson, and Mayor Lindsay of New York. Some of them made public comments or held press conferences, mostly saying very positive things about Habitat. Lady Bird Johnson said she wouldn't like to live there. Then the articles started appearing: the *Sunday Times*, and the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *Life* magazines, most of which were very sympathetic. In contrast there were some very critical articles. I recall

one by Edgar Kaufmann in *The republic*, in which he said Habitat was a monstrous stage set for a Frankenstein film. That made me sad, because Kaufmann happened to have been responsible for getting Frank Lloyd Wright to design Fallingwater for his father, and that is the most exciting house I've ever seen.

We were constantly under pressure to let our own house be photographed and published. But we felt that the privacy of our home was very important to us. We wanted our friends there, but we didn't want to make it into a public place. Once however, a whole group of young kids wandered in, not realizing that this was not an exhibit unit; they opened our door, and walked right through the house. They were surprised to see us there, when they reached the bedroom.

When the President of the U.S.S.R., Nikolai Podgorny, came to visit Dupuy, the whole building was covered with trench-coated NKVD people. They came in the lobby to go up to the Dupuy apartment on the twelfth floor. Podgorny and Dupuy went up in one elevator, the bodyguards went up in the other, which got stuck halfway and trapped them for an hour, to the panic and dismay of the RCMP and the other NKVD.

There were always secret agents in the building because either Pearson was there or some other head of state was visiting. Nina was taking the children for a walk one day when she saw de Gaulle walking up the stair above us.

The day U Thant stayed in Habitat there was a knock on our door about eight o'clock in the evening and a pale-faced secret agent said, "Please take your family and leave the building immediately." The first thing that came to my mind was, "My God, a structural failure, a crack somewhere." I said, "What is it?" He said, "I can't tell you. Just get out of the building." I said, "You've got to tell me. I have a responsibility for this building and I just have to know what's happened." And he said, "We just got a note that there's a bomb in the building." I said, "Oh, is that all," feeling absolutely relieved.

We all got out of the building, leaving, to our children's dismay, the goldfish behind. The note said the bomb would explode at nine o'clock, and I thought, if I were going to destroy Habitat there would be half a dozen places where I would place the bomb, half a dozen places that are very critical to the structure, where a strategically placed bomb would be very damaging, just as putting a bomb under the anchorage of a suspension bridge would easily destroy the bridge. I rounded up a group of RCMP and Navy bomb experts who had arrived and we started running through the building to all the places I felt we ought to look. Nine o'clock came and no bomb went off. U Thant left next morning.

They were a very lively six months. Every night there would be a party on some terrace and you would hear the music as if it were coming over a distant mountain. Some of the visiting ships docked right in front of us had bands and the sound would carry over the river.

Of course we had our own party, but not until three months after the opening because only then did the last of the furniture arrive. We covered our part of the building with colored lights and had a twenty-man steel band, playing loud enough to be heard in downtown Montreal. They were on one terrace while people were dancing on the other terraces.

We had a pretty good idea that the public response to Habitat was positive, but in the last days of Expo we became aware that we ought to have some kind of documentation of it. I was also encouraged to get that documentation by the U.S. government, who felt it would be useful in our programs there. I suggested to Central Mortgage that with thirty thousand people a day going through the building, there was a unique opportunity to sample their feelings about the environment. The U.S. government would have shared the cost, but Central Mortgage turned it down, so I decided we would do it on our own. We made up a questionnaire and hired a number of McGill students to give them out on the site. We got twenty-thousand-odd questionnaires filled out. In response to the question, "Would you like to live in Habitat and would you raise your children there?" eighty per cent were favorable.

The questionnaires were taken over, processed, and indexed by Cornell University for a comprehensive study of Habitat, *Anatomy of a Prototype*. The Cornell architecture students also interviewed the permanent tenants of Habitat after Expo. Preliminary results from the survey showed that ninety per cent of the tenants felt there was adequate privacy both within the dwelling and on the terraces. Ninety-five per cent felt that the open walkway system and the relationship of the car to the house in terms of climate were good. Ninety per cent said they expected to live there more than five years. Of course these are people who chose to move in, and it's foreseeable that they would be sympathetic. You might well get negative responses from others.

One of our first steps after the completion of Habitat had been a thorough post-mortem. Where, because of lack of time or knowledge, had we gone wrong? Where should the system be changed? I invited the superintendents and field foremen of all the contractors who were on the job and all our engineers, the mechanical, electrical, and structural engineers, and the senior people on my own staff, and we had something like ten evening sessions, with enough cheese and wine to loosen everybody's tongue. The mechanical engineer said what he felt he did wrong, for instance, and then he had to listen to the plumbing foreman who told him what he felt was wrong, and so we got the two experiences, the theoretical designer and the man who had to do it.

These post-mortems extended over a broad range of topics. There were discussions on the nature of concrete and the system of casting and the pros and cons of load-bearing systems. We talked about the nature of an assembly line and the shortcomings that we experienced in Habitat in terms of actually achieving one. We heard about the day-to-day problems and conflicts of the

plumbing superintendent and the electrical superintendent, and about the very real field problems of fitting the pieces together.

We had a long list of construction deficiencies that had to be corrected, but we got very little support from the Expo bureaucrats in forcing the contractor to fix the faults. A lot of the work had been done in extreme haste and done improperly. The topping in the streets, the flashing, the roofing, were all wrong. It was only after insistence on our part that sufficient monies were held back to assure that the work would be done.

But at that point Anglin-Norcross, the general contractor, went bankrupt. (That had nothing to do with us. They had, in fact, made some money on Habitat as a result of the settlement, which was very generous to them, but they had lost money on other projects.) This really made things complicated because, while Expo had a hold-back to do some of the deficiency work, the whole problem of guarantees and settling with the trustees and the sub-contractors became an absolute maze of legal complexities. As a result, many deficiencies never got corrected. When Central Mortgage eventually took the building over, Expo turned part of that money over to them but not all of it, and so Central Mortgage fixed some of the deficiencies but not all of them. Some of them are still there today, to my dismay.

Toward the end of Expo I became concerned about the lack of plans for the future of the building. The Canadian Corporation for the 1967 World Exhibition would cease to exist as a corporation, and there seemed to be no decision as to who would own the building or what would be done with it. The matter came to a head because many of the tenants wanted to renew their leases, and there was no one to renew them with. I felt it personally because I wanted to negotiate a lease to stay there and give up our apartment on Pine Avenue, which I had kept through the summer. I tried to get some kind of action but could get nowhere.

I foresaw that if there was no landlord, the building would sit empty, and even if it sat empty for only a short period, it would be very damaging: not damaging physically, but a building that is empty acquires a certain stigma.

The only statement that I had from Expo, from G. D. Rediker, the comptroller of the corporation, was that I could stay on a monthly basis for the same exorbitant rent. The whole attitude was pretty ridiculous, and so we moved back to Pine Avenue and everybody else left the building, some of them people who also wanted to say.

Several months of uncertainty followed. It was said that the National Harbours Board might take over the building, then that Central Mortgage might take it over, later that it might be sold as condominiums. No one knew what would happen. One reason was that the three governments were sitting down and bargaining, and the dividing of the assets took several months. While that was

happening the building sat there empty, and was being run on a haphazard basis. The irrigation system wasn't drained and was damaged, conversion to winter conditions didn't take place, causing some serious damage that had to be repaired later. Finally an announcement was made – I think it was February 1968 – that Central Mortgage was taking charge of MacKay Pier, including Habitat, for a limited period of time.

One might expect that they would then have started a vigorous rental program to get the building filled as fast as possible. But they didn't. For a long time they held onto the property without knowing what to do about it. When I inquired about rents they said the new rent scale had been established; a twenty per cent reduction from Expo rents, roughly. The study made by Bud Andrews and Eric Bell of Community Development in consultation with the Montreal Trust, which recommended a forty per cent reduction after Expo, had been ignored. The rent for our apartment had been seven hundred dollars a month and CMHC reduced it to five hundred and ninety dollars, compared with the four hundred dollars that Andrews and Bell had recommended. I felt the building wouldn't fill up at those rents. They had to acknowledge that they had a handicap, that because only part of the project was built there weren't community facilities on the site, there weren't schools, there weren't shops, and those inconveniences had to be made up by reducing the rents. Besides, the rent should be related to rents in other parts of the city. A good place to compare it with was Nun's Island, a development a mile upstream from Expo, where a three- or four-bedroom townhouse was renting for between three and four hundred dollars a month. Many people thought the high rents were related to the cost of the building; that was not so. The building had been written off as an exhibit and was transferred to Central Mortgage at reduced book value, so they could have established any rents they thought fit. They could even have filled it up with public housing tenants and set rents just to cover the maintenance costs.

Eventually we moved back in on a month-to-month lease, paying the high rent and hoping that things would change.

Central Mortgage's ideas about Habitat were quite different from ours. They felt the building was not a place for families. Their initial approach towards renting was that it was for single people or for corporations who would use it as an entertainment center. Hector St. Pierre, executive director of Central Mortgage, was quoted in *Time* magazine as saying: "I just don't believe that this building is the type of construction for people with young children; and I've nothing against children. I have seven of them." That, of course, influenced CMHC's attitude toward renting the building.

They were getting nowhere. The building was empty and the papers, particularly the Montreal papers, were having a ball. Habitat was empty because "people have rejected the concept," because "they don't like the idea," because it is "a white elephant." I couldn't keep my feelings within me any

more and when *Time* called and asked me how I felt about it, I said it was empty because of a ridiculously high rental structure and because the building was misunderstood and mismanaged by the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Time made a big story out of it and that seems to have had a positive effect because two weeks later CMHC reduced the rents. They were still not down to the Andrews and Bell recommendations but within a short time thirty units were rented, mostly the small units to single people who could afford to pay those rents. But the big units were still not moving.

I continued my criticism. It led to a meeting with Ian MacLennan of CMHC, who asked, "Why are you criticizing us?" After this conversation, things started to improve. Central Mortgage opened a grocery store. They produced a limousine service to take tenants to and from the city. They reduced the rents a second time, this time bringing them very close to the Andrews and Bell recommendations, and several families moved in.

The tenants in Habitat now are a heterogeneous group of people: McGill professors, musicians from the symphony orchestra, executives, artists, businessmen, older people, students, bachelors. They range from two or three young designers, who share the rent and have no furniture in the place except for a few wall hangings, to wealthy executives in the hundred-thousand-dollar bracket. They all appear to feel strongly about the building as a place to live. I know about twenty of the tenants and I learned about some of the others in a very revealing article in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* called "Habitat Lives". Characteristically, this appeared in Toronto while the Montreal papers were writing about Habitat being deserted and sending their photographers to take tricky shots of the building through a fringe of weeds.

There's an interesting difference between the professional criticism the building has received and people's response to it. You get a man like Reyner Banham, a renowned architectural critic, saying, I suppose after considerable thought: "Privacy was totally ignored in Habitat." And you get the people living there saying that they are very satisfied and happy with the privacy they have there. You get critics saying, "Habitat was built without regard to the Montreal climate." Yet the people living in it say, "We love its relationship to the elements, in all seasons."

Another problem was Central Mortgage's reluctance to commit themselves publicly to future plans for the building and the area round Habitat, whereas Nun's Island in their rental program didn't hesitate to say what a wonderful place it was going to be, with golf courses and shops, and people responded to that and moved in. Central Mortgage kept saying, "We don't know what will happen to the area." For all people knew, it would become harbor warehouses a year later. This reluctance to communicate a more imaginative plan to the public was, I think, responsible for the public feeling that Habitat was far away,

even though it is only two minutes from downtown. There was a feeling it was distant, isolated. People stopped me in the street in the winter of 1968-69 to say, "It must be very cold living in Habitat." My response was: "Well, when it's cold on Sherbrooke Street, it's cold in Habitat." But there was this mental image of the snow blowing through this building behind barbed wire in the middle of the harbor. I think that has been overcome now because people are living there, and they are very happy and vocal about it.

After the second rent reduction things started moving fast. By May 1969 the building was full and we were instructed to proceed with studies for the completion of the north cluster interiors, some of which were already reserved.

Nina and I, meanwhile, had become desperate. On one hand we felt the rent was too high for us to keep up with and, on the other hand, there was our landlord actively discouraging families with children from moving into the building. At that time, ours were the only two children in the building. We felt it was irresponsible to stay if our children were to be isolated in this way, and we decided to move out. Just after we had made our decision, ironically, rents were reduced and several families with children moved in.

There were other factors, of course. I was constantly getting involved with the administration of the building. I would come in and see vulgar gold anodized aluminum ashtrays in the lobby and I would get all upset about it and try to get them changed. This became quite a burden for both of us. It was taking an increasing amount of my energies and attention, which in turn irritated Nina who felt I was possessive of the building to the point where it was not healthy. I think she felt the need to move, so that I could "cut the umbilical cord", as she put it.

Leaving was made a bit more difficult for me when the press wrote it up in such a way as to suggest that I was abandoning the building and that made me feel quite guilty. But it was one of those painful things one has to do sometimes. I hope we will go back there eventually.