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Beyond Habitat

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Preface

Beyond Habitat is a diary of a fairytale. It is a memoir of one of the most unlikely sequences of events that occurred in architecture. It was written in 1970, three years after Habitat '67 was completed and Expo '67 opened its doors to 50 million visitors. I was thirty-two years old when I wrote it—my first book. May Cutler, a Montreal publisher, had approached me, having read an interview I gave, and encouraged me to put down my thoughts and tell the story of how Habitat came to be. MIT Press was the encouraging international publisher.

The narrative provides some background—my growing up in Israel; my “forced” migration to Canada at age fifteen; the inspiring journey en route to Canada, via Europe, visiting the monuments of Rome, Milan, Paris, and London; the adjustment in Canada; and then enrolling in Architecture at McGill University. Then, good fortune: I was awarded a housing traveling scholarship to study housing across the North American continent. My observations and experiences from this trip led me to propose “A Case for City Living- A Three-Dimensional Modular Building System” for my thesis project. Looking back fifty-five years later, after having practiced architecture on every continent and at every scale, I now realize that the narrative is almost unbelievable. It is, indeed, a fairytale.

How did a twenty-two-year-old recent graduate, with just two years of experience after graduation, albeit, one of them apprenticing with the great Louis Kahn, find himself an employee of the Canadian Corporation for World Exhibition, in charge of its master plan? How did he have the nerve to take the initiative and demand support to develop his academic thesis project into a buildable housing proposal as a central exhibition for the Montreal Expo? It is not so much the question of the merit of the concepts and ideas. Rather, the question is what did it take for a twenty-two-year-old recently arrived immigrant, who certainly had no social or political connections whatsoever, to convince, first, the World's Fair Corporation

and then the Federal Cabinet of Canada, and along the way, scores of committees, to decide to go forward with his proposal? To place their trust in an inexperienced young man with the realization of the project, encouraging him to establish an architectural practice staffed by many other young architects, his contemporaries, and provide millions of dollars to build what was one of the most experimental, technologically-advanced and risky buildings of that era?

As I walk through Habitat today, I reflect on the exquisite details, on the innovative use of materials, and wonder how this group of young people could muster the maturity and understanding to realize a building that appears so well-crafted even fifty years later.

Over the years as I traveled and lectured in many schools of architecture and architecture conferences around the world, many, many architects, both young and old, approached me to tell me basically the same thing—that reading *Beyond Habitat* made them decide to become an architect. With all due modesty, I always understood why that might be; a tale of a young, inexperienced architect who had a compelling idea, and somehow managed to realize it, opening the door to a long career in the profession with so many opportunities that followed is compelling, seductive, and optimistic. It is, of course, hardly a representation of what awaits every young architect who pursues the profession. Instead they must consider the reality of an under-compensated profession (compared with other fields); the many years of work in what are becoming larger and larger corporate offices; and then the statistics of how many architects have the opportunity to be in a position in the profession that allows them to realize their dreams. I would hope that those who chose to be architects, because of reading *Beyond Habitat*, are energized with optimism and perseverance, and conclude in time that it is possible to make a difference; to realize what you passionately believe in.

Since this introduction to the electronic publication of *Beyond Habitat*, forty-eight years since it was written, it is interesting to reflect personally, in a kind of confessional mode. Rereading the pages of *Beyond Habitat*, I think of the “chutzpah,” the sheer nerve of a young architect taking on the world, so to speak, to realize his idea. Watching several interviews with television journalists that have survived, reveals, in spite of the sheer nerve and determination, that the person being interviewed is fundamentally modest. This is no Howard Roark, conquering the world, knowing better than all, but rather a passionate, to-be-certain sure-of-himself person who has not let all that success go to his head. Perhaps it is the school emblem that we wore on our shirts at the Reali School in Haifa (והצנע לכת) “walk humbly” that made me “survive” that early success and continue with many projects to come.

—Moshde Safdie, January 2019