

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ERL - 5
Expo '67 or:
What did you do at the Fair?

c/o The Astor Lodge
Marlborough Place
London, NW8, England
3 June 1967

Mr. R. H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The Universal and International Exhibition at Montreal, in addition to Canada's Centennial celebration, marks the splendid liberation of escalators and motion pictures. The average visitor to Expo '67 is still likely to leave with tired, aching feet, but he may have a stiff neck as well.

Escalators! In typical urban settings they are almost invisible. You step onto moving staircases in department stores, train stations, airports and other scenes of congestion and never pay them any mind. The Metro and the Place Ville Marie in the "new" Montreal are both good recent examples of the lavish but unnoticed use of escalators.

At Expo, however, they take on life of their own. They not only make possible much of the glamorous, glorious, though sometimes silly, construction, they emerge as important architectural components. They have been used so casually, so freely, and with such care, it is a few days before you realize how complex their role is at Expo. Their efficiency in handling crowds and moving traffic through exhibition space is constantly overtaxed, but that is Expo's reward for excellence. No one expected such crowds.

There are long escalators and short ones, some brilliantly lit, others tunnel through darkness and murky gloom. In the American Pavillion an escalator shoots sky high into the open, empty, space beneath Buckminster Fuller's dome. An escalator, gliding up into the underbelly of the building's graceful prow, is the main entrance to the Soviet Pavillion. In the British exhibition an escalator carries you into the narrow tower that is topped, on the outside, by a camp, three-dimensional, Union Jack. The French displays sprawl over eight levels, connected, of course, by willful, Gallic, escalators. The modest Scandinavians have simple moving ramps in the center of their crisp, white, nautical building. Crowds, pausing at the touching Dutch tribute to Canadian war dead, leave the Netherlands Pavillion by a quiet escalator. The list seems as endless as ... a moving staircase.

Connoisseurs of comparative escalators, take heed, the most delightful of all are in the Theme Pavillions - Man the Explorer and Man the Producer. Geometrically smooth and finished from a distance, close up the six buildings are a complex, precise forest of lushly rusting steel joints. Winding throughout, from sudden level to sudden level, are more than a dozen escalators, gaily decorated with white theatre marquee lights. Glass siding makes the inner construction of the escalators as open as the buildings. The effect is as hypnotic as the workings of a watch.

According to an obscure press release, the first split-screen motion picture to be shown at a World's Fair was in Paris, 40 years ago. It was about Napoleon. The highlight of New York's tawdry fair, three years ago, was a short, gentle film presented by the Johnson's Wax Company. Instead of double-imaged history, "To Be Alive" was ebullient three-screened universality. A lengthened version (22 minutes), is on loan to the United National Pavillion at Expo, but it draws only modest crowds. At Expo there are dozens of imaginative, experimental films, uninhibited by commercial considerations or traditional techniques of production and display. More than 50 of the pavillions include films. The only thing they absolutely have in common is brevity, though most try to avoid language and narration because of the translation bind at bi-lingual Expo. Using not just multiple but myriad images instead of words, many of the films reach high levels of abstract sophistication.

Movies are an important, perhaps basic, part of mass culture today. Visitors to Expo, by the increasing millions, have not only accepted but quickly come to expect excellent films. Every line you join is full of critics anxious to tell you what to see. They also want to tell you exactly why. My notes suggest that the crowds like the "most" films best: the most spectacular - Bell Telephone's circular panorama of Canada; the most dramatic - Canadian National Film Board's Labyrinth; the most shocking - the Christian Pavillion, and Man and His Health (a draw); the most delightful - the Czech Kinautomat, and so on.

Since I have complained so often about detailed descriptions and reviews spoiling the carefully fashioned surprise of movies, I can't, in conscience, list the reasons to support the crowds' recommendations, but you can find them in most articles about Expo.

Practical suggestions are another matter entirely. The best time for seeing most movies is late afternoon, except the Labyrinth, where the line always averages two hours. Bell Telephone stands 1500 at a clip, every half hour. Do not enter on the far right, no matter how the crowd surges. You will be too close to the front and the spectacle may become an ordeal. The only way to guarantee seeing the Kinautomat is to go early in the morning, sit through a charming travelogue, refuse to be disappointed and leave when it ends, and wait a few minutes for the children's Kinautomat show. The theater is unlisted and seats 125, so in the afternoon and evening it is almost impossible to get in. Incidentally, you can lick the line for the remarkable Czech Pavillion itself by entering from the Kinautomat theater exit. The best bet in the Venezuelan film box is to stand in the center and pivot round to the four screens. The triple-screen British film is sufficiently abstract; you can enter and leave at will, but try to see it through.

The two films I liked best are in the Theme Pavillions of Man the Explorer. While I was at Expo, the last week of May, they were still

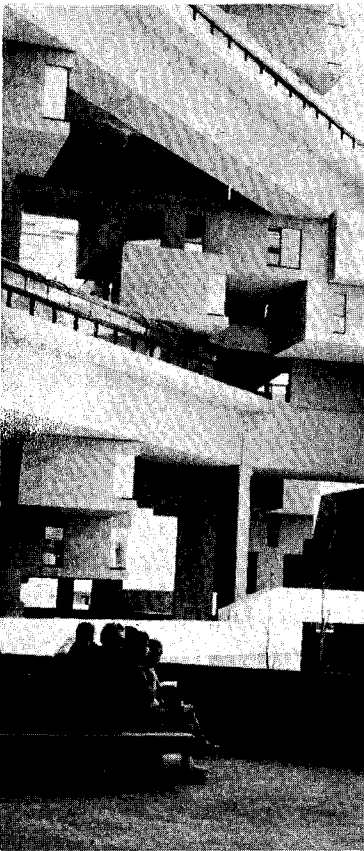
relatively unknown and therefore uncrowded. One, "Terre, Patrie de l'homme" is vertical, abstract, and lasts 12 minutes. It summarizes Expo's themes with modest brilliance. The canvas sling-back chairs designed to accompany the 45-foot high screen are wildly uncomfortable, but you forget them as soon as the movie begins. The other, "Man and the Polar Regions" is a circular film. You literally stumble into it, because the audience's platform is moving counter-clockwise to the screens, of which there are 12, projecting three images at a time. Mr. Graeme Ferguson spent 18 months in the cold, shooting more than 20 hours of film. The finished product lasts 18 minutes. Some fiend turns up the airconditioner to add a touch of realism.

About the Montreal Metro: it lacks all New York Subway system's famous charms. No screeching brakes, no layers of filth on the tracks, in the cars and stations, no empty liquor bottles, no whistling drafts, hidden exits, circuitous stairways to dark passages leading nowhere, no hawkers with "hot" merchandise, ranging from flowers to day-old bread. The Metro is no place to find discarded copies of the morning papers or the latest protest pamphlets.

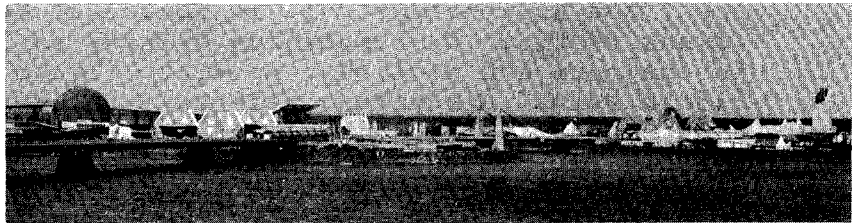
The picture-windowed cars are computer programmed to glide, almost silently, on rubber wheels through immaculately clean, brightly lit stations, each distinctively decorated with mosaic tile. ("Sir, I can't remember the name of my stop, I think it's on this line . . ." "What color is it, miss?" . . . "Color? Well, um-m, it was pale blue, I think." "Very good, that is Bleury. This way, please, two stops.")

While all indications are positive, it is too soon to be sure if the Metro is really the success it seems. In part this is due to Expo. The Metro opened last October, just as its novelty began to wear off, the spur line to Expo was finished and the fair opened. Any transit system that is fast, efficient, and cheap (a relative term - 30¢ or 4 tickets for a dollar), will have rush hour business. But usually not enough additional off-hour business to match its natural deficits. Vast hordes of Montrealers, accustomed to driving everywhere, took one look at the behemoth Expo parking lots and decided to follow the dark blue discs with a fat white arrow pointing into the ground. They are definitely getting into the habit of using the subway. There is no off-hour schedule on the line to Expo any more. The cars rush back and forth as fast as they can, usually with a full load. It is going to get sticky when, as, and if summer comes to Montreal, because the Metro's one flaw is a slight case of overheating. The situation may reach the "sardines in their own oil" stage before it can be corrected.

Financial judgment will come later, after Expo has ended and the crowds have left. Will the businessmen, housewives, and school children use the Metro to get around the city in December as they did in May? If so, then Montreal will face the delicate political problem of where to expand the system first. It now runs in and around the center of the city. Montreal has separate, but not equal, French and English population centers and suburbs. Alfred and Gaston will probably both be damned, metaphorically, before the first residential spur lines to the Metro are built.



EXPO '67 seen from HABITAT '67



Left to Right:
United States



Theme: Man the Explorer



Soviet Union (cut off
by Expo Express stop)



Theme: Man the Producer
and Expo Express stop



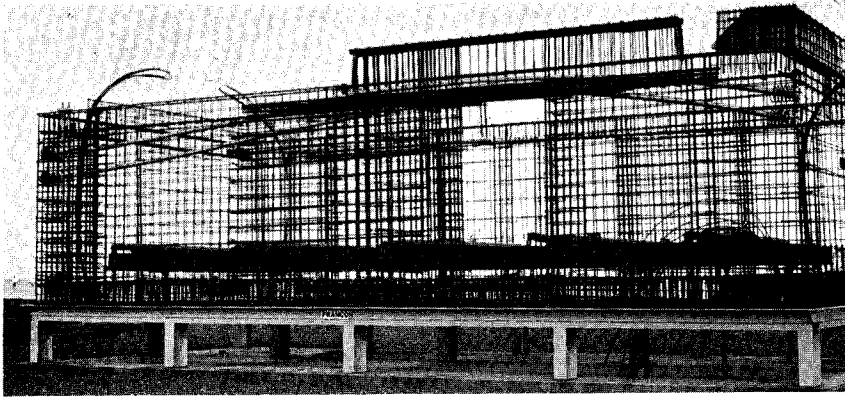
Germany



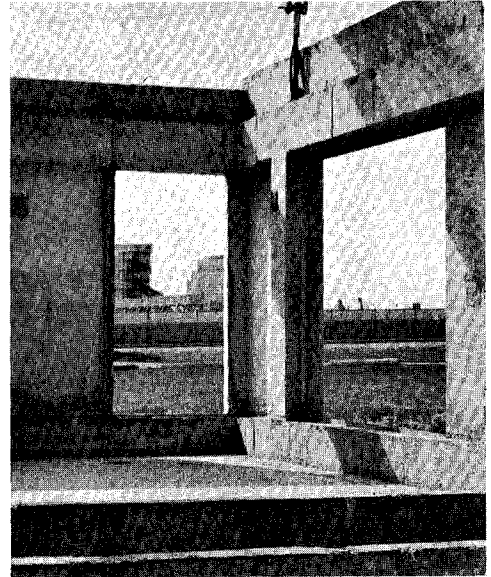
Great Britain

Many of the people working at Habitat thought their greatest problem would be public acceptance. Instead it seems to be getting the air conditioners and sprinkler system to work. It is surprising how few say "Good grief, what IS it?" and how many say "Have you been inside yet?"

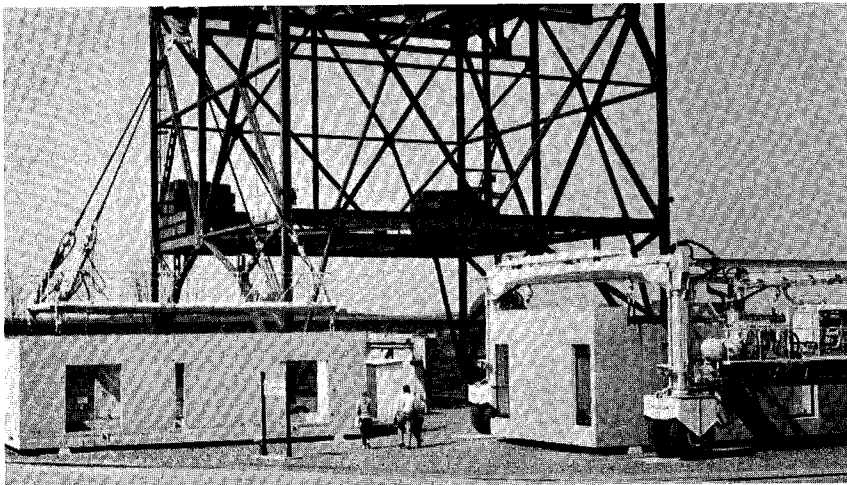
How to build a Habitat.



1. First assemble a steel rod frame.

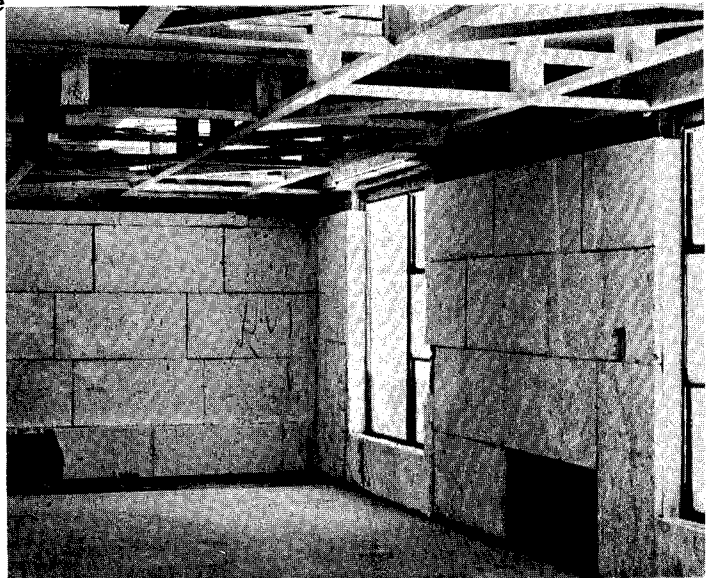


2. Then, pour and age a box of fine, grey, cement.



3. Add windows and stockpile until ready for placement by the world's largest crane.

4. When box is in place add insulation, wall board, flooring, and finish to specifications.



I really went to Montreal to see Habitat '67, the experiment in design and construction dreamed by Moshe Safdie, the young Israeli-born architect, and built by and for Expo '67. Expo, itself, the Metro, and the new Montreal were additional treats. After climbing through the public exhibits, I exercised a family introduction to an American corporation renting one of the "houses" for the duration of Expo. That gave me a chance to spend some time closely examining a finished, furnished, lived-in unit. Then, I persuaded the project manager to conduct a thorough and fascinating half-day tour of the construction process, and some of the in-place, but unfinished boxes.

Nobody cares that the ideas underlying the Habitat aren't new or "original." It doesn't really matter that construction costs have already gone over 22 million dollars and the figures aren't complete. Leonardo da Vinci figured out that man could fly, still that doesn't mean the Wright Brothers don't deserve credit for getting him off the ground. Many architects, designers, and engineers thought there must be some way to adapt mass production techniques to high density housing without building barracks or filing cabinets. Someday, in the not too distant future, Habitat will seem a rather quaint landmark. For the present it is an experimental breakthrough, a full-scale laboratory of ideas and processes played out on a riverbank.

Undeniably grey, cold and massive from a distance, Habitat is a 12-story complex of 158 individual houses shaped from 354 identical cement boxes, each pre-cast on the site, then lowered into jigsaw puzzle place by a giant crane (which was left on the grounds for visitors to ogle). There are sky streets, roof gardens, public gardens and probably not enough parking places at the ground level. As summer reaches Montreal, Habitat will begin to look more lively from the outside if only because the gardens will bloom. Already there are signs of individuality. For instance, the Commissioner General of Expo, M. Dupuy, has hung a gay yellow awning on his terrace facing south west.

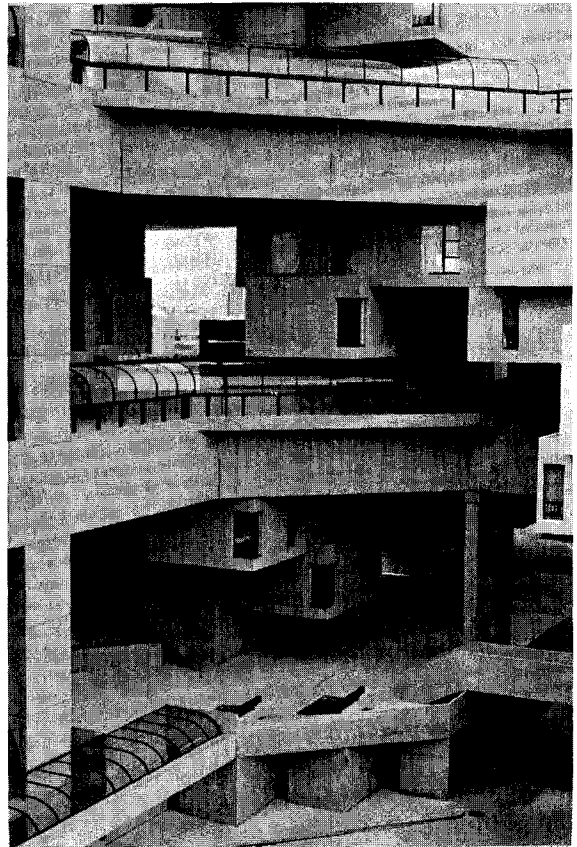
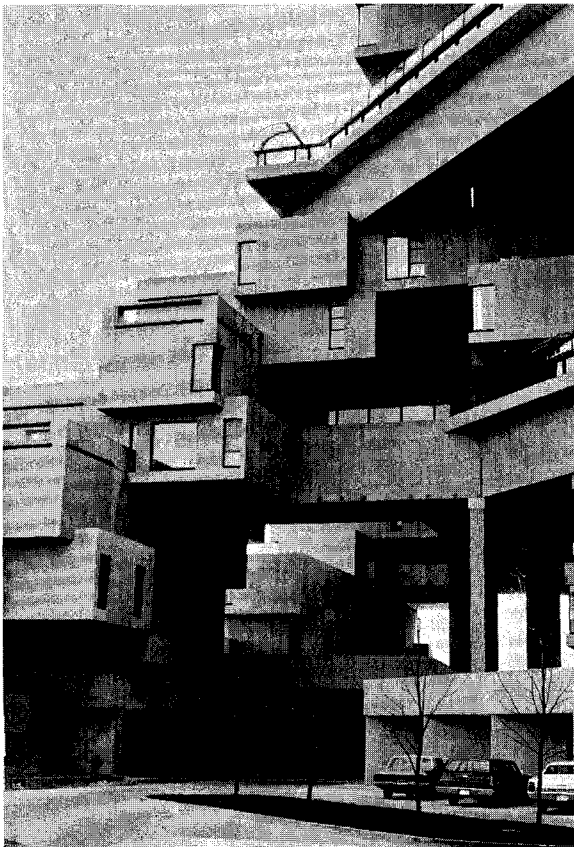
To date, praise for the Habitat has concentrated on the lessons of its technological breakthroughs in construction and on those design aspects which appeal most strongly to mobile families with small children who want to live in the city. Both are important and interesting. But Habitat is an urban environment, therefore not restricted to the chronologically young. I've recently visited a number of brand new retirement colonies in the United States that lure the elderly (or those at least over 50), away from the rest of society with promises of 24-hour security guards and so-called geriatric design.

It turns out that geriatric design usually refers to kitchens with sink and stove lowered to wheelchair height, and bathrooms with grip handles near tub and toilet. Big deal. The pre-fabricated kitchens and bathrooms of Habitat more realistically pass the "geriatric" tests of reach, stretch, maximum storage and minimum maintenance. You don't have to reach certain age to appreciate good design, either. The bathrooms are made out of two large pieces of pre-cast, fiberglass reinforced plastic with a non-skid finish. No sharp corners, no

hidden joints, no need for a basket of cleaning potions. Just soapy water will do nicely. They were built by American Standard, not another distinguished American plumbing firm whose name comes so easily to mind. Sorry about that. The kitchens are galley efficient and galley smooth - no handles or sharp edges there either. Again, they are easy to clean, the refrigerators, for example, slide out of their niches on air cushions. The convenient counter pass-through to the living room serves as buffet, bar, breakfast table, and can be closed off when desired.

There are few obligatory exterior stairs in Habitat and they have been wired to melt winter snow accumulation. A watchman at the elevator entrance sees who enters. Above, on the sky streets, partially protected from the gusts of St. Lawrence River wind, you can go out strolling to meet and chat with your neighbors, or you can stay home and avoid them while puttering in your roof garden. The units feel like houses, not apartments, because they really are soundproof. There are no interior units facing air shafts or blank walls, and, no window or terrace directly faces another. Catching the sunlight is Habitat's most wonderful innovation as a high-density dwelling. Abundant natural light reaches into each and every box from at least two directions. The one to four bedroom houses are assembled from one to three boxes.

Below: Street Scenes in the center of Habitat.



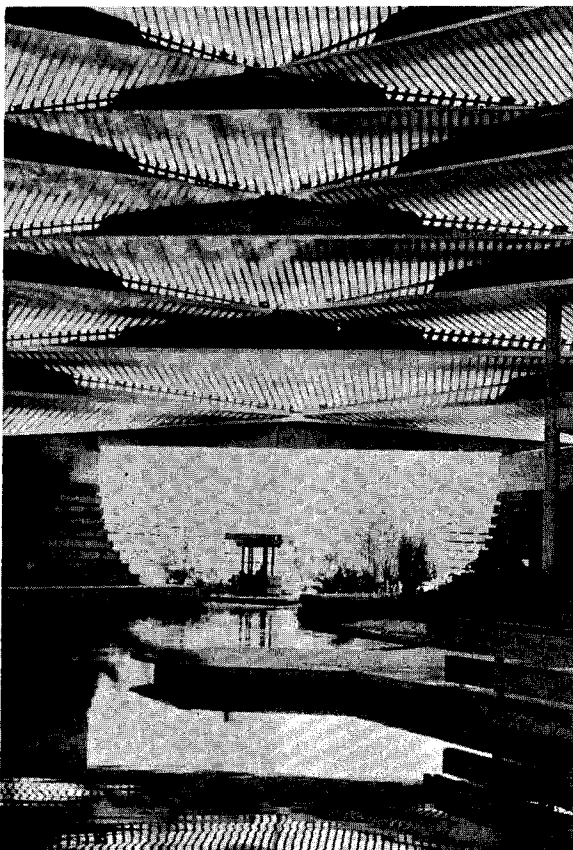
If the statistics, which show that Canadians are even more mobile than Americans, and move every 3.9 years, are correct, it is unlikely that anyone will actually live a lifetime in this, or any future Habitat. On the other hand, anyone could.

I grew up hearing about the '39 Fair with its exhibits, like the first television set, that really foretold the future, its beauty, and elegance. While I will never forget a hog judging contest at the California State Fair, I can't compare Expo '67 to anything I've ever seen. But it sets high standards in my mind for all future Universal and International Exhibitions.

Sincerely,

Eden Ross Ripson

THEME PAVILLION:
MAN IN THE COMMUNITY



The building is an openwork pyramid of Canadian timber. It looks like an abstracted Tower of Babel.

The clever exhibits are inside the corners of the base. The center is the tranquil reflecting pool (left). You are supposed to trot through the exhibits with a group, but if you have a camera they let you dawdle. Borrow a camera - it is a very peaceful spot.

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