

Habitat

The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements, to be held in Vancouver in May, will address the universal problems of the built world—a monumental assignment. Habitat, as the meeting is called, is to be the urban equivalent of the Stockholm U.N. conference on the natural environment in 1972.

That meeting served as a useful catalyst because environmental problems were perceived and publicized on an international scale; it was a consciousness-raiser that led to subsequent local action programs and legislation. Habitat will attempt to focus the same kind of attention on the urban condition.

New York's own recent Habitat conference, held as a preliminary to the Vancouver meeting, concentrated on inner city problems in their most particular and painful aspects. As specialized as they seemed, however, this city's financial and breakdown crises are not unrelated to the rest of the world. Dependent populations, delivery of services, deterioration of neighborhoods and, above all, costs form the universal urban horror story of the twentieth century.

Add to this the fact that a population increase of three billion is expected by the year 2000—with urban areas absorbing most of the poor and urbanization growing at twice the rate of population—and the urgency of Habitat is clear. Whether this growth will create the kind of new world settlements that are doomed to substandard sanitation and services, or impact old world cities with problems of money, race, class and decay, the urban crisis is real everywhere in terms of the conditions in which people live. It is simply a matter of time and place and degree.

The danger is that those nations that seek industrialization and urbanization will not heed the warnings of the older cities. The further danger is that the subject will be politicized at Vancouver, as has happened with other U.N. conferences. But Habitat's announced intention is apolitical—to create awareness and provide information on an international scale.

The hope is that it could even lead to a national urban policy in the United States, where the only present policy toward the cities is one of national default.