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Habitat

The United Nations Conference on Human Settlements—Habitat—convened in Vancouver on 31 May and brings to a head many of the substantive, "nonconventional diplomatic initiatives" which have resulted from the United Nations conferences on the environment, population, food and hunger, and the law of the sea. These pressing concerns are brought into focus in the problems of our cities, towns, and hamlets, where human beings relate to or destroy the environment which they share with other living things, nurture their children, modulate their population growth, till their soil, craft their tools and utensils, and provide generational transmission of emerging life-styles to those born there and to the strangers within their gates.

Habitat will emphasize the necessity of considering together all forms of human settlement from the rudest hut to skyscrapers, as people bred in one move to another, fleeing poverty in the countryside to a different kind of poverty in the swollen cities. They leave behind the tried ways of their ancestors to live in jumbled anonymity and low civic participation in cities which are increasingly dominated by the automobile, mass-produced goods, and internationally propagated building styles unrelated to local environments and basic or culturally specific human needs. As old cities decay before the onslaught of penniless millions—refugees from poverty, relentless population growth, civil disorder, war and massacre—new cities, jerry-built and inhuman, spring up, designed sometimes half a world away from those who will live in them. The pollution, poverty, and overcrowding in our cities and the relative and real deprivation in the countryside, perpetuated by large-scale exploitation of raw materials, together dramatize the contemporary problems of reconciling planning and freedom, human well-being, and the enhancement of profit, power, and prestige. In the economic realm of city planning, "housing" is often relegated to the status of a consumer item—an unfortunate necessity (associated with groups of people assembled for purposes of defense, offense, or production).

The problems are global. The participants, representing 140 governments and some 400 nongovernmental organizations, will have to struggle with the crucial question of scale: how to provide a framework within which aspirations for the human condition can be translated into continental planning for resource use and utility corridors and national policies for land use, yet leave towns and neighborhoods the autonomy necessary to adapt internationally developed designs to the needs of these smaller units. At present almost every aspect of human settlement planning is on the wrong scale.

The need for innovative economizing is greatest in the developing countries because of the magnitude of the problem and the scarcity of resources. But there is a complementary need in the industrialized countries—a need for energy conservation, the elimination of wasteful use of irreplaceable resources and pollution, and the redesign of our urban systems from deteriorated inner cities and isolating suburbs. The United States is conspicuous for the technical know-how which we can assemble when faced with war, and equally conspicuous for our laissez-faire abandonment of our cities and those who live within them. Americans should have much to offer and to learn as the Conference struggles with the task of viewing human settlement as a global system, analyzable by computers which can handle hundreds of variables, but responsible to the residents' historically developed sense of space, time, and community. Each settlement can be a poorly differentiated segment or a microcosm of the whole, fostering divisiveness or global responsibility.—MARGARET MEAD, *Curator Emeritus of Ethnology, American Museum of Natural History, New York 10024*, and *Chairman of the Board, AAAS*