From The Atlantic CITYLAB

Revisiting 'Habitat' 50 Years Later

Architect Moshe Safdie talks about his most celebrated project and how it still influences housing today.

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Moshe Safdie observes construction at Habitat 67, now half century old. (Moshe Safdie/UQAM)

Moshe Safdie, now 78, hadn’t even turned 30 when his first building, Habitat 67, was built.

The housing complex, a striking, 12-story massing of concrete cubes in Montreal, was based on his thesis project at McGill University. There he wrestled with the world of modern apartment design, which had mostly been reduced to austere, brick “Towers In The Park” and luxurious, minimalist glass boxes. Safdie wanted to create something that could be prefabricated and deliver open spaces, good views, and access to greenery in an urban environment for people of all incomes.

Affordability, however, never became a part of Habitat. Built in conjunction with Expo 67, the federally owned project saw its construction costs soar. To recoup costs, unit prices ended up substantially exceeding the cost of a typical middle-class Montreal apartment. Safdie has emphasized since that he didn’t promise affordability, only a “new model for urban living.” Instead of providing an affordable utopia, Habitat instead became a status address for the city’s elite. In a 2008 article for *The Walrus*, Adele Weder wrote, “As a world’s fair spectacle or as architectural research, Habitat was terrific. As a pilot project, it was a bust.”

The building was sold and then flipped to a tenants collective in 1985. It endures as a stunning design from a period in Montreal during the ‘60s and ‘70s which saw dynamic, modern architecture spread above and underground. It was designated as a heritage site by the Quebec government in 2009. Habitat also spawned a long and prosperous career for Safdie, building off of and expanding on the ideas from his university thesis and spreading them around the world.

Habitat turns 50 this year. To celebrate, the University of Quebec at Montreal (UQAM) is hosting *Habitat 67: The Shape of Things to Come*, an exhibit that connects one of the city’s most unforgettable buildings with Safdie’s more recent projects. CityLab recently caught up with Safdie to talk about Habitat, some unrealized projects, and how to tackle density while still delivering good design in today’s real estate climate:

How did the idea to revisit Habitat ‘67 in a show come about?

Well, not only is it the 50th anniversary of the project, it’s also Montreal’s 375th anniversary, Canada’s 150th, and Expo 67’s 50th. So it’s a big year in Montreal. We had a traveling exhibit, Global Citizen, that had just been to Boston and New York and a good third of it was Habitat, post-Habitat, and current residential projects. We proposed an exhibit on Habitat to the 375th committee and they agreed to sponsor it while UQAM’s architecture school would host it. So, the show is adding to Global Citizen while focusing on Habitat’s influence and evolution.

A model of Habitat 67 on display at *Habitat 67: The Shape of Things to Come.* (Mark Byrnes/CityLab)

You've said previously that the question about Habitat 67 isn't if it's appreciated but if you'll be able to replicate it. What prevented your other Habitat projects from being realized?

There were different reasons for each one not working out. But if I had to sum it up, I'd say the system wasn't ready for them. Puerto Rico's was undertaken with funding from Operation Breakthrough, a major HUD program meant to encourage research of prefab and new housing concepts. But then Reagan was elected and stopped the program. Construction had already started but it had to be abandoned [after 30 modules had been built].

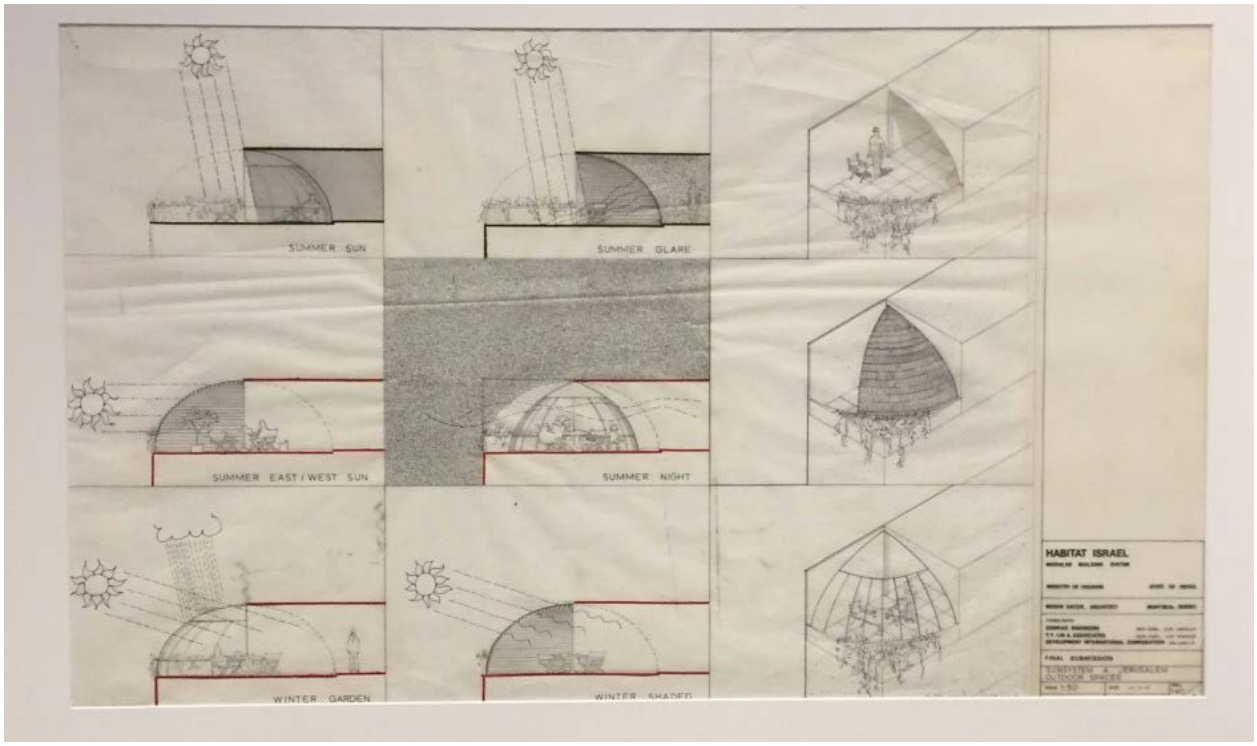
In New York, everyone was enthusiastic about our project but the marketplace couldn't adjust to all the innovation. There wasn't an organization with the will and ability to deal with unions, either, which we didn't have to deal with at Expo.

A model and rendering of Habitat New York, which was never built, on display at *Habitat 67: The Shape of Things to Come.* (Mark Byrnes/CityLab)

They were all sort of near the finish line but we just couldn't break through. There was an economic recession in the late '70s, which meant real estate came to a halt. There was zero building experimentation in the U.S. at that point. It was discouraging. The only housing I built at the time was Coldspring in Baltimore, which had a conventional design and was only partially built because the market had disappeared.

Urban housing then isn't what it is today. It was all about trying to convince the middle class to stick around or move back in. I only have one New York project at the moment; it's no Habitat, but it's something where you can explore outdoor spaces within the building. In Asia, there's more of a will and a bigger scale to work with although much of that has to deal with fractalization of buildings with gardens and outdoor spaces. In terms of prefab, the idea of building finished and lifted 3-D boxes is a dead direction until light fireproof

materials are introduced. As long as we're dealing with heavy materials, it's just too bulky and too complicated.



Safdie's drawing for one of his unrealized "Habitat" projects. (Mark Byrnes/CityLab)

I'm sure you've noticed some recent projects that are clearly inspired by Habitat, even if it's just an aesthetic hat tip.

I'm amused—pleased, even—to see it coming though the work of firms like like BIG and Herzog and de Meuron. It's more than aesthetic—it's fractalizing the surface to create balconies. For me, it's fascinating. It's 50 years after the fact and you'll see it in student work now, too. There's a lot of stuff in the architecture schools today that look at massing and fractalizing.

Paul Rudolph was apparently inspired by Habitat 67 and became interested in building modular housing soon after seeing it. Did you have a relationship with him at all?

In 1966, a substantial amount of the boxes at Habitat were up but the project wasn't totally finished. Rudolph, I.M. Pei, and Philip Johnson came up to Montreal to see me and tour the building. I was in awe! It was a very memorable moment for me.

Johnson kept talking about how it was the closest anything anyone got to Piranesi, and he was fascinated by underside of building. Rudolph was fascinated by the hillside terraced garden typology. A few months later his East River project came out, followed by his stepping terraced housing at Yale. He was very excited by it. I would not say I was influenced by him but we were steering in the same direction, the same wind. I enjoyed his work.

The original plan for Coldspring in Baltimore seemed like a really exciting plan. What did you hope to accomplish there?

It was going to be like a whole town, but we only built 10 percent of it. The town center was going to hover over the road and bridge two halves of the site. Housing would have lined up along all of the cliffs from a quarry and a permanent pond at the bottom. It would have been an amazing place to live—like a horseshoe opening at one end. But these parts never got built and the housing that did get built was traditional construction. I had a prefab scheme but the developer decided to just used concrete blocks. The deck housing is very livable, 45 years later.

Since Baltimore, I think your only other U.S. residential projects have been the one in Cambridge from the late '80s and now your upcoming New York project. Why so few?

The phenomena of developers going to big-name architects is relatively new, I think. Really only noticeable in the last 15 years. Why I haven't been getting those commissions is an interesting question. It's not that that I don't make myself available. I get interviewed by the big real estate players in New York, but somehow I don't have exactly what they're looking for. I was in the running for the Domino Sugar site in Williamsburg, but Viñoly ended up winning it at the time.

My practice doesn't have a marketing department and the work in Asia after Marina Bay Sands just keeps coming in, so we've had to turn a lot down. It's just the way things are. I've been in Boston for years and I'm embarrassed when people ask me what I've done locally in a period where I've been able to do work all over the world. It's weird!

You've had a few commissions in Singapore since the '80s. What about their approach to housing attracts you? What about your design philosophy attracts builders in Singapore?

My first Singapore project was Ardmore Habitat, which has since been demolished. Singapore doubled the zoning on the site and I was commissioned

by a shipbuilder who wanted to build the project out of modules he'd make in a shipyard but it was eventually made out of concrete. It was vertical and not terraced because of site constraints. More recently there's Marina Bay with three towers and a single core bridging the them together. I had a background with Singapore early on and realized there are developers there who really want to explore and push boundaries. But weirdly enough, when I got the commission for Marina Bay they didn't even know I had a local track record!

Safdie's original model for Habitat 67, which would have been 25 stories high. (Mark Byrnes/CityLab)

The low-rise, high-density philosophy you embraced early on in your career was an important rejection of the Towers In The Park trend. What is the housing type of today that your ideal project would reject?

Habitat 67's original scheme would have been 25 stories high. I was seeing it as an alternative to Miesian projects like Lafayette Park in Detroit and Westmount Square in Montreal, as well as Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation. As a student, Unite seemed like a betrayal to his projects from 1930s that had a sense of nature and roofs while this was a compact box with dark corridors.

"Most of what's still being built in cities is pretty depressing: inhumane towers facing each other, shadow and light indiscriminately being blocked."

More recently, with my Habitat of the Future project, I realized that the densities of what was built at Habitat are meaningless in today's cities—it's one fifth of what it needs to be. The projects I've realized more recently in Singapore and Chongqing are as dense as anything else out there. What I'd like to do on a site of adequate scale today is to a mixed use complex and show how a new typology can be put together in a very complimentary and reinforcing way.

What are the most important elements in humanizing a high rise?

We create private and public outdoor spaces, so the massing and the multiple towers connecting with each other like at Sky Habitat in Singapore has three bridge levels every 15 floors that meander between the towers. It's all totally public space: parks, pools, meeting rooms—things Singapore always provides in housing. About one-third of the units open to the sky and there are generous furnishings. It's pretty straightforward. If you go back to Habitat in Montreal, fractalizing, breaking up, clever circulation—all those ideas are there.

Habitat 67 is based on the popular 1960s idea of creating horizontal passages. The project creates spaces that are open to the outside while also providing protection from the rain without losing great views from the outside. Even though it's Montreal, residents still love living there when it's winter.

But there's a dilemma in Asia today, particularly with luxury projects—same with the Middle East—they don't like the horizontal streets, they want elevators to pop you into the apartment. I don't know if it's real or what developers are perceiving but that's being driven by a desire for exclusivity.

The key question, in terms of typology of high rise housing, is, do you have multiple cores with three or four apartments? Or do you create corridors on horizontal plane? Horizontal circulation is more popular and seen as useful with middle income housing.

What are your greatest concerns about the way urban development and housing has changed since you built Habitat 67?

The big cities are all denser and more concentrated than I expected, but the force of that density which you feel in New York, Chicago, or Boston, you don't feel in the rest of the country. For ten years, I went back and forth to Bentonville, Arkansas, doing the Crystal Bridges museum. It went from a population of 20,000 to 100,000 during that period but nothing was more than three stories high. There's no contiguous use of land there: a farm here, a farm

there, with sprawl in between. America still uses land as if it were an infinite resource. It's just not like that in the rest of the world.

So, is the urban density and the congestion around the world worse or better today? I think there's optimism about cities again but most of what's still being built is pretty depressing: inhumane towers facing each other, shadow and light indiscriminately being blocked. I do think we're about to be nicely surprised by a revolution in urban transit, because of self-driving cars. We're on the verge of something, but we don't understand it yet. It could have a huge effect on density levels.

I'm amazed now of the force driving these extreme densities. In New York, everyone wants to be in one place and they'll pay any price. But what drives the density seen for miles in so many urban real estate markets across Asia? Why not reduce the density by 30 percent and spread it out more? What about their economies are pushing towards extreme concentration? I still don't understand what pushes it to such extremes.

Habitat 67: The Shape of Things to Come *is on exhibit at UQAM's Centre de Design through August 13.*

About the Author

- Mark Byrnes is a senior associate editor at CityLab who writes about design, history, and photography.