

A New Age of City Building Is Forecast At U.N.'s Habitat II Conference

Architect Robert Geddes was a participant-observer at Habitat II, the United Nations conference on human settlements, held recently in Istanbul. A former dean of the Princeton University School of Architecture and Urban Planning, he is now in private practice. RECORD spoke with Geddes about the conference, attended by more than 10,000 people.

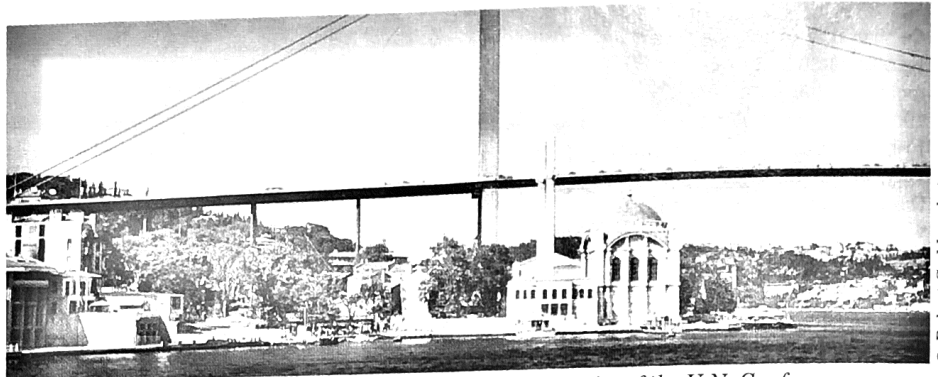
Record: What was the main agenda of the conference?

Geddes: The U.N. had a series of conferences starting with the Rio de Janeiro conference on the natural environment in 1992 and ending with the built environment in Istanbul. Between 1992 and 1996 there were conferences on women's rights in Beijing, population in Cairo, and social development in Copenhagen. These were all important milestones and the issues discussed at these conferences interact in cities. Every day the population of the world is increasing by one-quarter of a million people and most of that growth will be in cities.

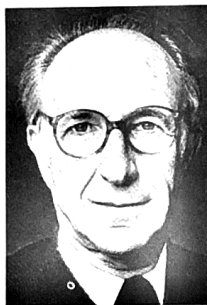
The United Nations wanted to address two issues at Habitat II. The first was how to provide adequate housing for all, and the second was sustainable development in an urbanizing world. Conference organizers also wanted to create a global policy on shelter and sustainable design, which was related to individual statements submitted by the 185 U.N. member governments. The Istanbul Declaration and the Habitat Agenda set standards and criteria against which future actions will be measured and judged.

Record: What, in your view, was most significant about the conference?

Geddes: What was unusual about Habitat II was its effort to involve organizations other than governments in urban policy and development. For the first time, non-government agencies had a voice at a U.N. conference. This means growth in the importance of civil society and that's good for architecture. One aspect of the future of architecture is that we will not see our clients as simply as "public sector" or "private sector." We will see the growth of the *civic sector*. Community development organizations, cooperatives, and design



Oratoköy Mosque and the Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, site of the U.N. Conference.



"I would argue that cities of the future will be based on the neighborhood as building block.... For me, the solution lies in understanding what the street is and how to design it.—Robert Geddes, (photo left)

coalitions will be the wonderful clients of the future.

There was also an emphasis on incorporating the landscape into the development of cities. In the conference's Best Practices exhibition, the Chinese, for example, showed an initiative for garden streets, and one for starter housing. The Germans presented plans for the renewal and rebuilding of existing fabric—industrial sites and cities.

Record: You spoke on a panel called "What cities will look like in the 21st century." What do you believe will be the shape of our cities in the next millennium?

Geddes: I would argue that the cities of the future will be based on the neighborhood as the building block. The issue for architects will be how they create centers and neighborhoods. For me, the solution lies in understanding what the street is and how to design it.

We must also begin to develop ways of bounding cities and probably that will result in the development of new cities. The Middle Ages

were a time of city building. People were striving towards the modern world and I think we are in a similar period. The architects' responsibility is in learning how best to build centers and edges. And, the practice implications are quite exciting. It will result in the expansion of architecture, which I think will include landscaping and civil engineering, infrastructure design and planning, and development planning.

Record: Based on your experience at Habitat II, what role can architects play in the shaping of the 21st century city?

Geddes: I put a real emphasis on the form of cities. The role of architects is concerned with spatial growth and form. Urban growth and form affects the natural environment; it affects women's living environments, particularly as they pertain to child rearing; it affects where people can [afford to] live and where they can [find] work.

I believe that in the future there will be five recognizable architectural products: building systems that are appropriate; the renewal of the existing building stock (looking at existing stock as landscape); looking at the neighborhood as a building block; ways of achieving sustainable communities; and the development of new cities.

Interview conducted by Abby Bussel.

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