

The foundering of the Ark

Once Canada's crowning symbol of small-is-beautiful technology, the Ark is closing its doors

By Silver Donald Cameron

The Ark was a step into the future, a romantic experiment in what Pierre Trudeau described as "living lightly on the land." Built in 1976 on the shores of Spry Point, 70 km east of Charlottetown, P.E.I., the government-funded solar house was meant to provide self-sufficiency to a family of four: food from organic gardens, fish from culture tanks, electricity from the wind, warm air and hot water from the sun. No pesticides, no pollution. A fresh start for an exhausted planet.

The Ark became Canada's most famous symbol of the small-is-beautiful approach to technology, but the reality never managed to live up to the symbol. This week, the Ark will close its insulating shades and greenhouse ridge vents, a victim of a hard-nosed economic climate and of its own limitations. It was a vision, and like all visions it dimmed in the realization. The windmills, intended to sell electricity to Maritime Electric, either didn't work or threatened to self-destruct. The tropical Tilapia fish wouldn't breed at temperatures the Ark's shaky solar heating system could sustain. The live-in family, a couple with two children, couldn't handle 5,000 guests a year and moved out.

In 1978, the Ark was converted to a research and demonstration centre for low-cost energy-efficient food production, under the direction of The Institute of Man and Resources (IMR). The institute was set up under Alex Campbell's Liberal government in 1975 to investigate alternate energy sources and technologies which Campbell considered crucial to resource-poor P.E.I. But he retired and the Liberals were defeated by John Angus MacLean's Tories, who did not share the enthusiasm. In addition, the Trudeau Liberals grew budget-conscious and abolished what Andy Wells, executive director of IMR, calls "the very selective areas in the federal government which funded these innovative sorts of projects. The projects themselves have less political appeal than they did five years ago, and they've discernibly lost support." The Ark's funding problems were compli-

cated by the fact that its activities cut across several federal departments. Says Peter Meincke, president of the University of Prince Edward Island and chairman of IMR: "The Ark's view of man is incompatible with current ways of looking at humans, and its structure, which is based on ecology, doesn't match the funding structure at all."

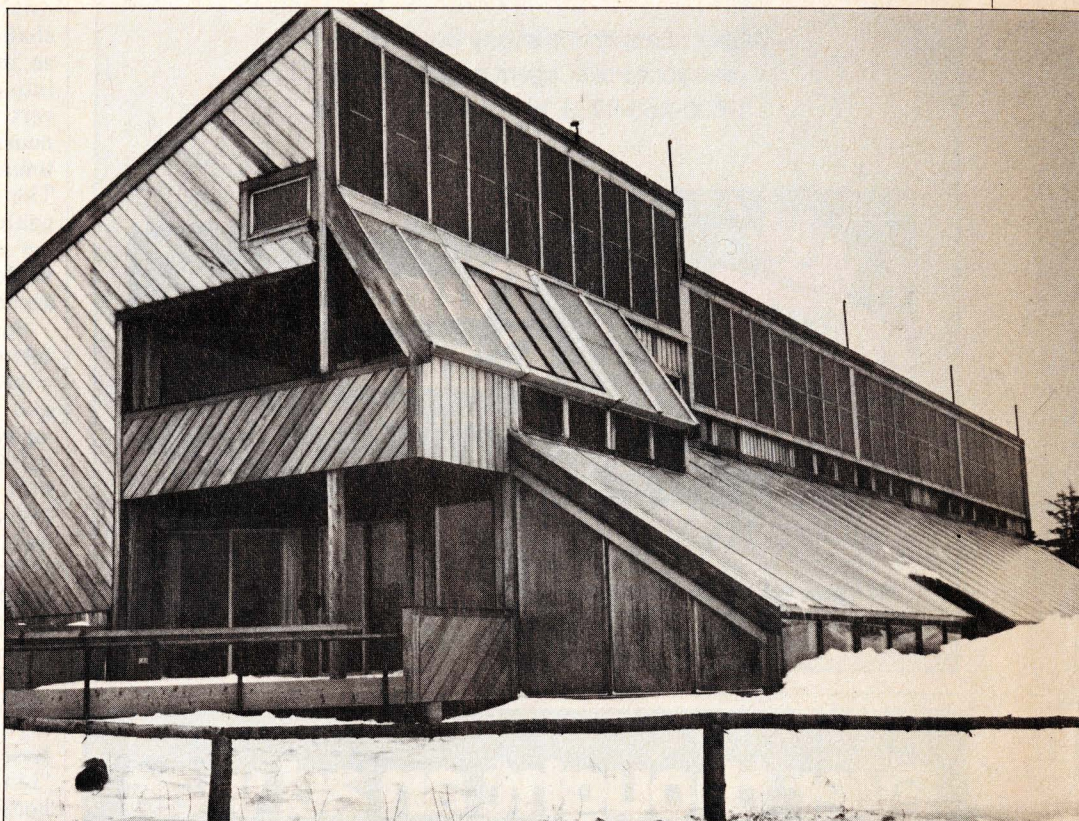
At the same time, scientists were finding the Ark inconvenient for research. Spry Point is storm-lashed and bitter in winter, and the spring thaw makes the kilometre-long driveway a quagmire. The new director, Ken MacKay, and other staffers were strained by commuting from Charlottetown. Wells thought the research could be done better elsewhere, and at less cost. When IMR announced

last January that it would wind the Ark down, even MacKay reluctantly agreed.

MacKay was at an exchange in Kenya and Tanzania when the official announcement came, however, and the number of people there who expressed disappointment about it caused him to change his mind. The tar sands, Petrocan, Telidon, none of this means much to the "South" side of the North-South dialogue, says MacKay, but the Ark, which costs \$300,000 a year and employs 11 people (24 in summer) is a powerful symbol of the low-cost

technologies that do offer hope to the Third World. "When I came back," says MacKay, "I thought, Jesus, this can't just end!"

In early spring, the Ark itself was all blossoms and greenery and good-hu-

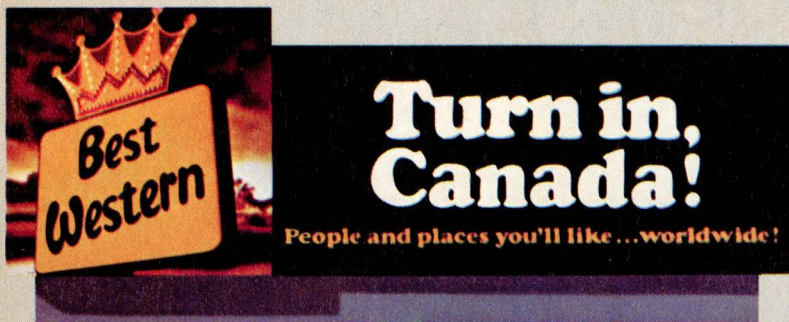


The Ark (above); Trudeau at 1976 opening: fresh start for an exhausted planet, nutty dream

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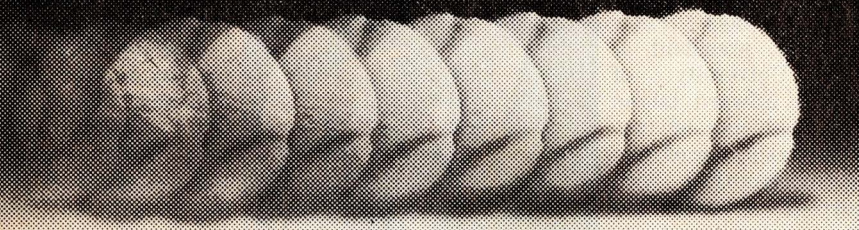
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mored people talking in a sun-washed dining room over a lunch of fresh-picked salads. In February, the domestic solar greenhouse had provided 200 salad servings; it holds more than 60 varieties of vegetables, 25 types of flowers, strawberries, grapes, herbs and dwarf peach and citrus trees.

In the commercial greenhouse, 2,000 rainbow trout fingerlings swarm in a shallow tank. The water is not dumped, as in most hatcheries, but circulates into another tank. There, bacteria convert the fish wastes to nitrates, which nourish watercress, lettuce, celery and tomatoes growing on Styrofoam rafts. The water is now clean enough for fish again, and its warmth contributes 60 per cent of the heat to the greenhouse while inducing the trout to reach marketable size in half the usual time.

Susan Mahoney, education co-ordinator, loads visitors with pamphlets and papers by Ark staff—on aquaculture and horticulture, on greenhouse management and design, compost and self-sufficiency. Mahoney answers 250 letters a month, and writes about 15 detailed replies a week. The Ark's one-day workshops draw participants from all over the Maritimes: Gerrit Moleman, a teacher in Sackville, N.B., was inspired by a greenhouse workshop to build one at his school.

Wells hopes that some of the Ark research will continue, though his funding proposals have not been answered. Researchers are already scattering. "Linda Gilkeson's work on solar greenhouses is the first and best in Canada," says Mahoney, "and Linda has just accepted a full PhD scholarship at Penn State, where they're delighted to get her."

All the same, many Islanders applaud the closure, having always considered the Ark a nutty dream of immigrant hippies, elitist and aloof, irrelevant to the Maritimes. One such doubter is Barry Clark, the provincial energy minister, whose department is responsible for the project. When IMR announced its termination, Clark told the legislature he was "surprised," having allocated "over \$2 million to be directed to the Spry Point Ark Project over the next five years." That evening, however, he told the CBC that the Ark "was not providing any worthwhile research," and that for the cost "I don't think we've seen very much benefit from it." The Ark is an hour's drive from Clark's office, but he has never visited it.

The fate of the building has not been decided. There are various plans to turn it into a museum, a limited research centre or a demonstration project. Says Wells hopefully: "The Ark isn't just a building, it's a continuum of learning. Whatever happens at Spry Point, learning will go on." ☼