

The Way We Were, the Way We Are: The Theory and Practice of Designing Cities since 1956

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“**T**he action of the Congress of the United States in appropriating one billion dollars to create a new urban environment places on all of us a responsibility we cannot duck.”¹ So Edmund Bacon began his remarks at the Harvard University Urban Design Conference in 1956, provoking our reflections on the history of urban renewal, on the smaller value of a billion dollars in today’s money, and on the current lack of any such congressional commitment. Not having federal subsidies to help cities buy land and buildings makes a big difference in the design of cities today. The flow of federal money is the presence behind much of the discourse at the 1956 Harvard conference about the directive role of the urban designer. In the 1950s, developers and elected local officials could be expected to pay attention to urban renewal administrators, housing authority directors, and the heads of city planning departments—and by extension the designers who worked for them—when they could unlock subsidies from Washington and help determine how they were spent. Once cities have to depend more on their own resources, the city design problem becomes one of managing the cumulative effect of everyday decisions about zoning, housing subsidies, and public works. The planning and urban renewal directors revert to being administrators rather than initiators, and the role of initiator belongs mainly to the state transportation departments (the *de facto* planners of today’s regional cities) and to private real-estate investors.