

urban development, and a young Jane Jacobs brought to the meeting an awareness of the creative sparks induced by urban density. Through the stimulus of disciplinary convergence around a commitment to socially responsible practice, urban design was confidently positioned to become the cutting edge in the creative reshaping of the American city.

Twenty years later, however, nearly all the hopes and plans for the future had crumbled in the wake of unexpected events. The economic boom abruptly ended in the 1960s. Cities around the world exploded in demands for radical change, and by the early 1970s, the world economy had plunged into the deepest recession since the interwar years, triggering a frantic search for alternative ways to rekindle robust economic growth and control growing social unrest. Optimism was replaced by urgent necessity, as all that once was so solid and taken for granted about metropolitan modernity, including the hopes and dreams of the new urban design, seemed to be melting into air.

Over the next three decades, new urbanization processes would dramatically reshape the American city but along very different lines from those imagined by the participants in the Harvard conference. By the end of the twentieth century, the modern metropolis had become virtually unrecognizable, as crisis-generated restructuring processes carried American urbanism into an almost entirely unanticipated era. So great were the changes that they made superfluous any critique of the lack of vision present among the participants in 1956. No one then could have predicted what actually happened.

In the wake of this profound reconfiguration of the modern metropolis, urban design was itself transformed. No longer at the center stage, it drifted away (in the United States, at least) from its earlier ecumenical ambitions and interdisciplinary desires to become a relatively isolated subfield of architecture. In its new position, urban design theory and practice became increasingly cut off from the mainstreams of city and regional planning as well as the social, political, and aesthetic ambitions of European traditions of urbanism, both so vividly present in 1956.

As a professional and academic specialization, urban design seemed to wrap itself around a concept of the physical form of the city that had little to do with the rapidly changing urban landscapes it was meant to address. Ambitious visions of the city as a whole were reduced in scope to narrowly defined and pragmatically feasible projects, as the urban (small *u*) became increasingly subordinated to Design (big *D*).