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Roger Herz: Urban Activist

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[CityLaw Profile – Roger Herz: Urban Activist](#)

[CityLand Profiles](#) • [CityLaw](#)
04/12/2021 • [\(1\) Comment](#)



Roger Herz at the microphone asking a question at a CityLaw Breakfast. Image Credit: CityLand

First to the microphone at many CityLaw Breakfasts during the Q&A session following the speaker's prepared remarks was Roger Herz. Roger, with a serious demeanor and in a steady voice, would announce himself: "Roger Herz, Time to Improve Municipal Efficiency." And then Roger would ask a pointed question, well prepared, and personal, often adding that he had been pressing the same point for years. The speakers always knew Roger from prior appearances, emails and events. They regularly responded with apologies, explanations and promises to get back to Roger.

Roger was born on December 5, 1933 in New York City to Alfred E. Herz, a prominent lawyer and his wife, Lydia. Roger has lived in his family's Upper East Side apartment for his whole life. Roger attended the selective and academic Hunter College Elementary School, P.S 6 and the Bronx High School of Science where he a member of Arista and won the Saint-Gaudens Medal. He graduated cum laude from Syracuse University in 1955, majoring in political science. He was an editor of the Syracuse Daily Orange and a member of the academic honorary Phi Kappa Phi.

Roger Herz was deeply influenced by his father Alfred E. Herz who graduated from New York Law School in 1923. Roger's father was a lifetime republican and active participant in reform politics. Alfred Herz served in the State Attorney General's office and ran unsuccessfully for Municipal Court Judge in 1929 and 1930 and as a fusion candidate in 1935. Alfred Herz's reform politics earned him endorsements by the Citizens Union and the County Lawyers.

Roger intended to become a lawyer like his father but changed course while studying at Columbia University from 1955 to 1958 where he concentrated on public law and government. At Columbia he met Wallace Sayre, one of the country's leading authorities on City government and the co-author of the classic 1960 book, *Governing New York City*.

Roger recalls a dinner with Prof. Sayre at the Columbia University faculty club during which Roger advocated transportation fees. Prof. Sayre responded that a similar idea had been suggested by a colleague William Vickery, the Nobel Prize winner who first advanced the idea of congestion pricing. Prof. Sayre loaned Roger an early version of Vickery's work and Roger has been working on making public transit more self-sustaining and efficient ever since.

After Columbia Roger worked at the City Planning Commission from 1956 to 1963 in various capacities involving budget, transportation, historic preservation, and parks. Robert Moses was then on the Planning Commission. Roger recalls that Moses never attended Planning Commission meetings downtown at 2 Lafayette Street. If Moses had to attend, the Planning Commission accommodated Moses by meeting at Moses's office on Randall's Island.

Roger worked on transportation as a staffer on the Temporary Commission on City Finances from 1964 to 1966. Roger and others on the Commission were asked to present to Robert Moses's staff the Commission's proposals that emphasized public transit and advocated shifting public funds from cars to public transit. One of Moses's staff blurted out during the presentation, "Why public transit; everyone owns a car. I don't know anyone who doesn't own a car." Roger, a bicycle rider, demurred and has never stopped fighting for public transit.

In April 1969 the New York Times published a letter from Roger advocating that the City recapture ownership of the Triboro bridges and tunnels and shift their toll revenue to public transit. But by then Governor Nelson Rockefeller had a similar idea and the Triboro's assets and toll revenue stayed under state control.

Roger later worked with other agencies and commissions but found his special niche as an urban activist. He created TIME, an acronym for To Improve Municipal Efficiency, and LIFE, an acronym for Let's Improve Federal Efficiency. TIME and LIFE are Roger's alter egos and provide authoritative civic platforms for Roger to challenge governmental waste, inefficiency, bias or laziness. His method is to keep up, show up, ask questions, and follow up.

In his public efforts, Roger follows his oft-repeated motto: "Better futile than passive."

Roger currently is not in the best of health and has not appeared as often at the microphone. Roger uses Zoom but typing a question over Zoom is not the same as standing at the microphone. We miss Roger at the CityLaw Breakfast microphone and hope that Roger, and all of us, can be back together soon.

In 2013 The Center for New York City Law with the assistance of Roger and his sister Carol Herz Brull dedicated the Center's conference room to Roger's father Alfred E, Herz.

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