Introduction

An activity with ancient roots, but also one that has been rediscovered and reinvigorated in recent years, urban design has become a serious and significant area of academic endeavour, of public policy and of professional practice. This is reflected by the increasingly widespread recognition of its value across public and private sectors around the world. This change has been matched by increasing demand for urban design practitioners and, more generally, for urban design skills throughout the built environment and land and property professions, and by an increasing demand for urban design education at universities and in the workplace.

The new interest in urban design is as a form of – and contribution to – place-making. Carmona *et al.* (2003), for example, defined urban design as the making of places for people. More precisely and realistically, they saw it as *the process* of making *better* places for people *than would otherwise be produced*. A definition that asserted the importance of four themes – that urban design is for and about people; the significance of 'place'; that the field of opportunity for urban designers is typically constrained and bounded by economic (market) and political (regulatory) forces; and the importance of design as a process.

It is useful to acknowledge the difference between an understanding of urban design for analytical purposes (i.e. what is urban design?), by which all urban development may be considered to contribute to urban design, and a more normative understanding of urban design (i.e. what is 'good' urban design?), by which only some urban development might be considered to be urban design. Seen analytically, urban design is the process by which the urban environment comes about; seen normatively, it is – or should be – the process by which better urban environments come about. We must also be aware of the possibility and existence of implementation gaps between what urban design seeks to do and what it actually does do.

Urban design also refers to products or outcomes and to various processes. It is, for example, variously a product (the design of the created environment), interventions into a process (e.g. a land and property – or real estate – development process) and a process itself (i.e. the design process).

The notion of urban design as a process is a reoccurring theme in this book. Design is a creative, analytical and problem-solving activity through which objectives and constraints are weighed and balanced, the problem and possible solutions explored and optimal resolutions derived. The process of design should also add value to the individual component parts, so that the resulting whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In the final analysis the quality of the whole is what matters because it is this that we experience.

There are (very) few 'hard-and-fast' rules or absolutes in urban design – substantially because the process of design involves relating general (and generally desirable) principles to site and programme requirements, where the context and creative vision will always vary. Indeed there is a danger of generally desirable design principles being treated as inflexible dogma or of design being reduced to the simplistic application of a formula – practices that negate the active process of design. Design principles must always be used with the flexibility derived from a deeper understanding and appreciation of their basis, justifications and interrelations and the context to which they are to be applied. In any design process there are no perfect 'right' answers – there are only better and worse answers, the quality of which may, in turn, only be known over time.

Who then are the urban designers? A good answer is that urban designers are those who make decisions that affect the quality of the urban