The term 'urban design' came into currency in North America in the late 1950s, replacing and superseding the more traditional, narrower and somewhat outmoded term 'civic design'. Typified by the City Beautiful Movement, the latter was associated with a highly artistic and physical (visual and spatial) approach to urban design, focusing on the siting and design of major civic buildings – city halls, opera houses, and museums – and their relationship to open spaces. Contemporary urban design is more expansive than this. It is primarily concerned with the quality of the public realm – both physical and socio-cultural – and the making (and managing) of meaningful 'places' for people to enjoy and use. More recently the quest for more sustainable urban form has become a more explicit component.

This section presents a set of six chapters exploring understandings of urban design and discussing its precise nature and purpose. Chapter 1 is **Francis Tibbalds'** 'Places matter most', from his 1992 book *Making People-Friendly Towns: Improving the public environment in towns and cities* (Longman, Harlow – now published by Spon Press). A founder of the UK-based Urban Design Group in 1978, Tibbalds' ideas and activism in the cause of urban design had been evolving throughout the 1980s. Their moment came when Tibbalds' term as president of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) in 1988–89 coincided with His Royal Highness Prince Charles publicly expressing his views about contemporary architectural – but, more implicitly, urban – design in the second half of the 1980s. The Prince subsequently offered a framework for what he saw as architectural design (although much of his framework was well within the remit of urban design). Firmly within the visual-artistic tradition, the Prince's ideas sparked an important debate. In response, Tibbalds offered a more sophisticated (and empathetically) urban design framework, comprising the following ten principles: places matter most; learn the lessons of the past; encourage the mixing of uses and activities; design on a human scale; encourage pedestrian freedom; provide access for all; build legible environments; build lasting environments; control change; and contribute to the greater whole. Each of these principles was the focus of a specific chapter in Tibbalds' book. The chapter selected here sets out what might be considered Tibbalds' 'golden rule' of urban design – 'places matter most' (i.e. that the creation of places through good design is more important than the design of the individual buildings of which they are composed).

Defining precisely what is meant by urban design is challenging (see Cowan, 2004) and many definitions based on spatial scales or disciplines are unduly limiting. In practice, little value arises from putting boundaries around urban design; it is more enriching and positive to identify, clarify and debate central beliefs and activities. This is the approach taken in Chapter 2 – **Ali Madanipour's** 'Ambiguities of urban design', originally published in the *Town Planning Review* in 1997 and subsequently a chapter in his book *Urban Design – A Socio-Spatial Enquiry* (John Wiley, London). Its principal value is its comprehensive discussion of ways of defining urban design by confronting the ambiguities about possible meanings. Madanipour identifies seven sources of ambiguity: the first three are concerned with the 'product' of urban design (i.e. urban space or the urban environment), the last three concern urban design as a 'process' and the product–process dilemma is the subject of the fourth ambiguity. Although his ambiguities are deliberately presented as oppositional and mutually exclusive, for most it is a case of 'and/both' rather than 'either/or'. Madanipour concludes that because urban design is a process through which we 'consciously shape and manage our built environments', urban designers are interested in, and engaged with, both the process and its product. In common with many commentators, Madanipour also sees contemporary urban design as a multidisciplinary field of activity rather than a discrete discipline or profession.

Chapter 3 is **Bob Jarvis's** 'Urban environments as visual art or as social settings?', originally published in the *Town Planning Review* in 1980. In this chapter, Jarvis argues that two broad traditions of urban design thought stem from different ways of appreciating design and the products of the design process – as aesthetic objects or 'displays' (i.e. for 'looking at') and as environments (i.e. for 'living in' or 'using'). This distinction is discussed in terms of a 'visual-artistic' tradition, emphasising visual form, and a 'social usage' tradition, primarily concerned with the public use and experience of urban environments. In doing so, Jarvis focuses on the 'classic' urban design canon and adds value to it by organising it into two traditions. While the social-usage understanding of urban space has continued to develop rapidly since Jarvis's article, the visual-aesthetic understanding has not. Thus, while the social-usage tradition is represented across the range of contributions in the social, perceptual, temporal, functional and morphology dimensions covered in this book, the visual-aesthetic tradition has developed little beyond Cullen and the townscape school of the 1960s (see Section Five). The exception to this is the environmental