

# Introduction: the argument

Of all the design fields, urban design has the greatest impact on the nature of cities and city life. However logical the land-use pattern prescribed by city planners, the beauty and utility of its buildings and the nature of the landscape, it is the overall three-dimensional combination of forms and spaces as seen in time and over time that gives a city its character. Cities evolve at the hands of a myriad designers consciously or subconsciously seeking to fulfil their own interests. Urban design involves coordinated and self-conscious actions in designing new cities and other human settlements or redesigning existing ones and/or their precincts in response to the needs of their inhabitants. Above all it represents acts of will in creating positive changes to the world, physical and social. It needs to be done well. To be done well urban design needs to have a sound knowledge base. That base can probably be best coordinated in the form of an abstract descriptive and explanatory theory of urban form and the forces that shape it but designers generally do not care to derive solutions from such a knowledge base. They rely heavily on precedents. We can certainly learn much from what we have done in the past, from case studies of completed developments.

Urban design is a confusing term. If the goal of this book is to clarify its meaning in terms of the products it creates and the processes used in creating them, then it needs to start by describing why such a clarification is necessary. To some design professionals there may seem to be no need to do this. Urban design can mean anything one wants it to mean. It is, however, difficult for a field to make progress if it fails to be conceptually clear about its nature, purposes and methods. The book's goal is not, however, only to give some clarity to the meaning of urban design but also to demonstrate the variety of types of urban design efforts that have taken place during the past 50 years. It is now possible, given all the experience we have had, to create a preliminary typology of urban design activities that provides some structure to the domain of the field.