

# Private-property decision makers and the quality of urban design

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Urban design needs to be inclusive, rather than exclusive, of sponsors' and users' interests and concerns: . . . it needs to use language that sponsors and users understand. . . . I mean the language of money and the market place—we need to promote the idea that quality sells. (Gummer, 1997, pp. 7–8)

## Introduction

Since 1945 the property industry has transformed the character and form of towns and cities across Europe and North America. The total value of property in the UK now exceeds £1 trillion and is approximately equal in value to the equities and gilts markets together. By 1989, immediately before the recession in Britain and elsewhere, approaching 80% of all new construction orders in the UK, by cost, excluding infrastructure, were in the private sector and were for profit-related developments (CSO, 1993). Although the proportion had fallen back to 68% by 1993, it subsequently climbed steadily to reach 75% by 1996 (CSO, 1997). Private-property decision makers—developers, investors and occupiers—exert a powerful influence on the quality of urban design, yet the role and influence of the property industry on the quality of the built environment and, more specifically, the impact on property values of differing urban design approaches, have attracted astonishingly little attention from academics and others in the property industry and the design professions. The resulting vacuum has allowed misconceptions, myths and even prejudices to thrive.

Urban design practitioners and scholars alike have tended to shy away from examining this critical aspect of their work, sometimes in the erroneous belief that it was beyond their field of concern but possibly fearing that it was beyond their comprehension. Some of Jonathan Barnett's early writings, based on his experience in the Urban Design Group of New York City, represent notable exceptions to urban design's traditional reticence on the subject (Barnett, 1974, 1982) but even Jon Lang's "'tour de force" of urban design scholarship' (Carmona, 1996, p. 355) only devotes a single chapter, comprising a mere 14 pages, to a discussion of the development process. This said, Lang correctly acknowledges that:

*The position that many urban designers take is that understanding the nature of land development processes is outside their domain of interest. . . . This lack of understanding reduces their role in creating the future city and places them at the whim of the development community. (Lang, 1994, p. 371)*

In July 1994, the Department of the Environment (DoE) published a discussion document to launch