

1

The Public Realm of Cities and Urban Design

Almost all definitions of urban design state that it is concerned with the public realm of cities and the elements that define it. One of the clearest definitions is:

Urban design should be taken to mean the relationship between different buildings; the relationship between buildings and streets, squares, parks and waterways and other spaces that make up the public domain . . . and the patterns of movement and activity that are thereby established.

DoE 1997, paragraph 14

Urban design consists of multi-building projects that vary in size from building complexes to precincts of cities to, occasionally, whole towns. Sometimes urban design includes the design of the buildings themselves, but often it impinges on the architecture of buildings only to the extent that their bulk, uses, particularly on the ground floor, and their façades define the public domain. But what then is the public domain?

What is considered private and what is considered public varies from culture to culture and within cultures over time (Madanipour 1996; Low and Smith 2006). For professionals involved in any of the environmental design fields, the public realm is comprised of two parts. The first deals with the components of the built, or artificial, environment in which behavior occurs, and the second specifies how communal decisions are made by governments and in the marketplace as defined by a country's laws.

The Public Realm of the Built Environment

The built public realm of a city is not necessarily coterminous with publicly owned property. In a society where property rights are sacrosanct and where individuals have the right and freedom to build what they desire, the public realm and public open space—spaces to which the public has right of entry—may refer to the same thing. In an editorial (December 27, 2002), the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, stated that anything visible in situ should be part of the public realm in terms of photography work.

The position taken here is that the public realm consists of those places to which everybody has access, although this access may be controlled at times. It consists of both outdoor and indoor spaces. The outdoor spaces include streets, squares, and parks while the indoor may include arcades, the halls of railway stations and public buildings, and other spaces to which the public has general access such as the interior of shopping malls. This statement is controversial.

The problem is that the nature of many “public” places is ambiguous because although the public has relative freedom of access to them, they are under private



(a)



(b)

FIGURE 1.1
The public realm of cities.
(a) Paternoster Square, London;
(b) Lexington Avenue at 35th Street, New York.

ownership. As the common domain of cities is increasingly privatized (or rather, private interests are providing public spaces), this ambiguity is likely to continue. Paternoster Square in London is privately owned while Lexington Avenue in New York is public property. Both are open for people to enter at all hours, but in the former case the owners can bar entry.

The Elements of the Built Public Realm

The elements that are deemed to constitute the public realm depend on a political stance and help to define that stance. A fruitful way of looking at the public realm is as a set of behavior settings—a term coined by ecological psychologists in the 1960s (Barker 1968) but one that is of increasing importance to designers (Lang and Moleski 2010; Lang and Marshall 2016).

A behavior setting consists of a standing (or recurring) activity pattern, a milieu (pattern of built form), and a time period. The milieu must possess the *affordances* for the behavior to occur, but because the affordances are there it does not mean that a specific behavior will take place in it. Affordance refers to the potential use of an object or environment by an individual or a species because of the object or environment's form, structural qualities, and the materials of which it is constructed, given the competence of that individual or species (Gibson 1979). The activities that actually occur depend on the predispositions, motivations, knowledge, and competencies of the people involved. The same pattern of built form may thus afford different patterns of behavior for different people at different times of the day, week, or year. Some of the patterns may occur

frequently while others may occur only on special occasions (for example, the celebration of national days).

The milieu consists of the floor of the ground, the surfaces of buildings, and other physical elements such as vegetation that both bound it and structure it. The variables are diverse and their attributes even more so. Of particular importance in urban design are such concerns as the sequential experiencing of the environment as one passes through it, the ground floor activities, or lack of them, that are housed in the adjacent buildings, and the attributes of the enclosing elements of spaces. In the urban scenes shown in Figures 1.1a and b, the physical public realm consists of the elements of the artificial environment around a person. In the former illustration, it consists of the surface of the square, the column, the façades of buildings, the ground floor uses, and the entrances on to the open spaces. On a typical street, the elements are essentially the same but take on a different form. If, however, urban design is concerned with the whole nature of human experience, it has to address the nature of the activities and the people who engage in the built environment as well. It is the set of behavior settings and how the milieu affords activities and, simultaneously, acts as an aesthetic display that is important.

As important as the layout of the public realm is the nature of the façades that frame these spaces. What are they made of and how are they fenestrated? What are the uses that face onto the open space? How frequent are entrances along the streets and squares? What is the nature of the pavement, or sidewalk? How tall are the buildings that enclose the spaces? How are the spaces illuminated? What are they like at night? What are the activity patterns that take place in the spaces? Who are the people engaging in them? These are the variables that distinguish one place from another—one city from another, and one of its precincts, or neighborhoods, from another.

The Functions of the Built Public Realm

Designers seldom consciously consider more than a limited set of the potential functions that the built environment can serve in their analyses and designs. The world is too complex for every function of built form to be considered simultaneously. The same patterns of the built form, either as surroundings or as objects, will, almost certainly, serve different functions for different people. One of the major functions of the components of the built environment is as a financial investment. All designers know this, but it is seldom clearly articulated as a function of buildings in architectural theory. Architectural critics seldom write about it.

Many urban development decisions are made on fiscal grounds. For their sponsors, such as banks and other lending institutions, and for their owners, buildings represent an investment on which they hope to make a profit. The public realm, in this case, is only important to property developers to the extent that it affects their investment decisions. They may, however, voluntarily or under public coercion use their own funds to improve those aspects of the public realm that their developments affect. Public agencies use tax income to improve the public realm created by buildings in order to increase the value of properties and thus the inflow of tax revenues. These revenues are then used to support other governmental activities. For architects, landscape architects, and artists their professional work is not only a means of income but also an advertisement of their tastes and skills that, they hope, will yield additional income in the future.

In addition to financial rewards, the milieu provides three basic amenities. It can afford activities, provide shelter, and act as a display that communicates meanings. The design concerns thus range from “(1) instrumental aspects which are the most manifest through (2) how activities are carried out, and (3) how they are associated into systems,

to (4) their meanings, their most latent aspect” (Rapoport 1997, 462). These functions can best be understood within a model of human needs and motivations.

Human Purposes and the Functions of the Built Public Realm

There are a number of models of human needs. None is perfect but that developed by Abraham Maslow is held in the highest esteem because it seems to explain the most (Maslow 1987). Maslow suggested that there is a hierarchy of human needs from the most basic (survival) to the most abstract (aesthetic). These needs trigger motivations to behave in one way or another and inspire people (and communities) to own valued objects and to be in settings that display specific characteristics. These motivations are culturally shaped and often define a culture.

A model relating Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs to the functions of built form is presented in Figure 1.2. The model specifies that both needs and the mechanisms to fulfil them have to be perceived within a social order. In urban design, the polar extremes of social order are represented by autocratic and democratic societies. In the former, decisions are centralized in the hands of an individual or a coterie of people; in the latter, diverse people hold the power to make decisions and, ultimately they are subjected to the opinions of the population concerned.

The diagram shows that the patterns of built form required for achieving many needs are interrelated. The most basic needs, according to Maslow, are physiological. The fundamental need is for survival, which means that the environment has to afford us shelter. It must also protect us from life-threatening events. Some of these events, such as earthquakes, are natural phenomena, but we humans have created others. The perception of the potential occurrences of such events very much shapes what we demand of the public realm of cities. Hurricane Sandy has much affected thinking about the future in New York at both the political and individual level.

Once basic physiological needs are at least partially met, people are motivated to seek a sense of safety and security, physiologically and psychologically. The former motivation is highly related to the need for survival. How best to segregate pedestrian and moving vehicles is a recurrent issue in urban design. Dealing with crime and now terrorism has become a constraint on design. Providing for people’s psychological sense of security involves them having appropriate levels of privacy and their being in control of their social environments. People have an expectation of privacy for almost every activity pattern in which they engage as individuals or groups.

Figure 1.2 also shows that the socio-physical mechanisms used by people to attain a feeling of self-worth are closely related to the achievement of safety and security. The built environment is very much an indicator of people’s social status. One of the debates in current urban design is whether to create images that refer to specific locales or, alternatively, to the international, global images favored by the institutions of the global economy (compare, for instance, the design ideals of Battery Park City and Lujiazui as described in Chapter 10). Within some cultures, the layout of the built environment being in accordance with spiritual beliefs also meets these needs. What is important to recognize is that the built environment, the public as much as the private, is a symbol of who we are and/or whom we aspire to be.

The highest level in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is that for self-actualization—to be what one can be. The design implications for this level of need are unclear. Cognitive and aesthetic needs, however, have more understandable implications. They are manifest throughout our lives. We need to be able to learn to survive as well as to make advances in life, so the ability to learn is present in achieving all our needs. Aesthetic needs not

remembered, serve human lives. This book is primarily concerned with anthropophilic environments in Izumi's terms.

The Cultural Dimension

"All people have the same needs", Le Corbusier observed (Le Corbusier 1960, 82). Assuming that the models for designing the built environment can be reduced to a single universal paradigm has proven to be a costly error in urban design. The ordering of needs, as Maslow perceived them, may be universal but the ways in which we strive to meet them show considerable variability. The activity patterns, from those of everyday life to the most obscure ceremonies, depend on our stage-in-life-cycle, our gender, and our social roles within specific cultural contexts. What we are accustomed to do and the environments we are accustomed to inhabit very much shape what we seek in the future. We are habituated to what we know. Departures from the norm, particularly major departures, can be highly stressful. Yet history is replete with examples of attempts, sometimes successful, often not, to change the face of society through radical architectural and urban interventions.

It is not only the activity patterns that vary from culture to culture, but also concepts of privacy and territoriality and attitudes towards public displays of status and wealth. Patterns of the environment, the materials they are made of, their coloring, and the whole manner in which they are illuminated carry meaning based on learnt associations and, possibly, some that are innate. In a number of societies, the coding of status through design is readily observable and in others it is subtle.

Most importantly for urban design is the attitude towards individualism and cooperation. Much-admired urban places such as the Piazza San Marco in Venice were built piece-by-piece over the centuries, with each new developer and architect being conscious of fitting in with what had already been built. They had what architectural historian Peter Kohane calls a "sense of decorum" (Kohane and Hill 2001). The same attitudes were a hallmark of traditional Islamic societies, where a host of conventions drawn from the Qur'an governed the design of individual components of the environment, ensuring an integrated whole. Such attitudes do persist but they are not a significant characteristic of the societies in which the case studies included in this book exist. Designers today compete for originality in their work. The reason urban design has emerged as a field of professional endeavor has been in order to seek cooperative procedures that will enhance the quality of specific areas of cities.

Cultures evolve; they are not static. In an era of globalization not only of the economy but also of information, various patterns of the public realm are perceived by officials as symbolically desirable because of what advertisers and the international media promote as desirable. The desire for universal images in the public realm of cities often means that the requirements of many local activity patterns are overridden in the search for international designs that enhance the self-image of those people with the power to influence decisions.

Multiplier and Side Effects: The Catalytic Function of Urban Design Projects

Multiplier effects generally refer to the positive impacts of particular investment decisions and patterns of the built environment on their surroundings and side effects to the negative. The urban design concern is often with the catalytic effect that projects have on future developments. Do they start trends in investment policies or not? Do they

establish new aesthetic attitudes? Many of the case studies presented in this book show how specific buildings (for example, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao) and landscapes (for example, High Line Park in New York and the Cheonggyecheon stream restoration in Seoul) have been successful in this sense (see Chapters 7 and 11, respectively).

A prime function of many urban designs is to enhance the quality of the urban environment by changing investment patterns. Unfortunately, some generic urban design concepts have been inappropriately applied and have had unanticipated negative impacts. As an example, many shopping streets that were converted to transit-only ways or pedestrian malls have now been “de-malled” to allow vehicular traffic to use them once again (see the case study of State Street in Chicago in Chapter 7). Of great public concern nowadays is the impact of the built environment on the natural environment.

Buildings and other hard surfaces change the patterns of winds and breezes flowing through the environment, the processes by which water tables are created, and heat is reflected and absorbed. They, in particular, create heat islands changing local climatic patterns. We are only just beginning to be conscious of these matters in urban design, and in most localities the political will to energetically deal with them has yet to emerge.

The Public Realm of Decision Making

The obligations that members of a society have toward each other establish the respective roles of governments and individuals in the conduct of their lives. The debate over what is private and what is public, and what the rights of individuals are versus the rights of the community (however one defines the term), is central to urban design. The debate is over the rights of individual property owners to build what they want versus the rights of their neighbors and the broader society to impose restrictions on those rights in the interests of a greater public good.

The twentieth century saw the flow and ebb of the welfare state. The late 1980s saw the beginning of the second capitalist revolution and a greater emphasis being placed on the individual and individual rights than earlier in the twentieth century. The belief is that personal freedom of action benefits everybody. In many ways the translation of this ideology into action has been highly successful, especially at the global marketplace level of finance. The processes of change have, however, been a painful experience for many people and laissez-faire approaches to urban development have had many opportunity costs associated with them.

To what extent should the public sector decision-makers intervene in the property development process? Should it be to control development to ensure public health and safety? Or should it be to promote public amenity? In other words: Should the public sector employ sticks or carrots or both in shaping the nature of human settlements and their components? How far can the public sector support, through legislation or subsidies, private profit-making investment actions that are perceived to be in the public interest? In the United States, court cases (for example, *Southwestern Illinois Development Authority versus National City Environmental*, 2002) have limited the power of the governments to use the power of eminent domain—their right to compulsorily purchase land to use for public purposes. They cannot acquire land to be sold on for private uses even though the public amenity of any ensuing development might have highly beneficial public consequences.

The case studies included in this book show a wide variety of roles of the government in property development. In some cases, the development has been part of a national policy to redistribute population. These policies have been implemented through the acquisition of land, the creation of a development program, the hiring of a designer or

set of designers, and the construction of a project. In other cases, the whole development process has been entirely privately funded and subject only to standard zoning controls. Many urban development projects have involved the public and private sectors of an economy in a partnership that has set the requirements for a scheme, organized the process of its development and its funding, and then implemented it (Fosler and Berger 1982; Frieden and Sagalyn 1991; Istrate and Puentes 2011).

Governments intervene in many ways in how cities are developed. Municipal authorities create land use policies, decide where and how the infrastructure necessary for development should be provided, and ensure that what is built is safe and healthy. They have also intervened in determining the aesthetic nature of the environment, from the ambient quality of streets and public spaces to the appearance of buildings. In using their power to do so, they have had, in the United States at least, to demonstrate that the goals they establish are in the public interest and that the mechanisms they use to achieve those goals are constitutional and based on evidence (see *Daubert versus Merrell Dow*, no. 92–102, 1993, and *Dolan versus the City of Taggart*, 1994; Stamps 1994). A United States Supreme Court decision in the case of *City of Los Angeles versus Alameda Book*, 2002 repeated what had been said earlier that a municipality “cannot get away with shoddy data or reasoning” (Stamps 1994, 145). These legal decisions are not universally applicable, but the implied suggestion is that designers must seek evidence before predicting what the outcomes of design decisions will be. Knowing the outcomes of previous urban design efforts is one source of supportive evidence. Well-researched case studies show what the outcomes of specific design decisions are.

The Quasi-public Role of Property Developers

Entrepreneurs creating large-scale property developments play a quasi-public role in the development of cities. This observation is particularly true of the early twenty-first century. Public institutions now rely heavily on private sector investments in developing the public realm of cities. It is frequently the private rather than the public sector that sees opportunities for urban improvements in terms of new buildings, building complexes, and open spaces. They, like the institutions who sponsor their works, want what they do to be a financial success. To be a financial success there must be some public demand for the products they are creating. At the same time, property developers often have to be cajoled with financial incentives into undertaking developments that are perceived to be in the public interest but are not as profitable as other types of development (see the case study of New York’s Theater District in Chapter 12).

Property developers’ attitudes vary considerably. Some are vitally interested in the common good; others are not. They all have to make a profit on their investments. They are not necessarily opposed to governmental controls over their work provided the controls make sense and do not inhibit their work arbitrarily. Developers have a history of supporting design guidelines if the improvements resulting from the guidelines ensure that their own investments are successful. Most developers, nevertheless, like architects, have powerful egos—they want to do things their own way, the way they know how.

The Objectives of Urban Design

Visions differ on what concerns need to be addressed when designing/creating future urban places. Each urban design paradigm has a set of objectives embedded in it. Sometimes these objectives are stated in a manifesto or specific program. Often, however, they are implicit in the generic designs used as the basis for making specific designs.

A number of broad objectives can, nevertheless, be identified in the writings on urban design. The built environment should be efficient in the way it handles the variables described in Figure 1.2. It should be designed to encourage economic growth. It should provide a sense of historic continuity to enhance people's self-image. It should help sustain the moral and social order of a society and should be designed with a sense of justice for all to the extent that this order is a physical design concern (Harvey 2003).

The position taken in this book is that the broad goal of urban design is to provide accessible opportunities, behavioral and aesthetic, for all the citizens of and visitors to a city or one of its precincts. What, however, should the opportunities be and how does one deal with accessibility? Who decides? The marketplace? The public policy question is: How far should the public sector intervene in the marketplace in providing opportunities for what range of people? And then: How accessible should the opportunities be? For whom?

Secondarily, if one accepts Maslow's model, there is a need for people to feel comfortable in engaging in the activities they desire and that a society regards as acceptable. Comfort has both physiological and psychological dimensions. The concern is with the nature of the microclimate and with the provision of feelings of safety and security as people go about their lives. Safety and security requirements are related to feelings of control over one's privacy levels and over the behavior of others towards one. How much privacy are we prepared to give up in order to feel safe because we are under public surveillance? Safety concerns are also related to the segregation of pedestrians from vehicular traffic flows and the construction quality of the environment around us.

Another design concern is to enhance the ambience of links—streets and arcades and sidewalks—and places—squares and parks. Ambience is related to the aesthetic qualities of a place, its layout and illumination, the activities that are taking place there, and to the people engaged in them.

The artificial world does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in terrestrial niches formed by the climate, geology, and flora and fauna of a place. One of the objectives of urban design is certainly to ensure that this niche is not destroyed. The concern is, or should be, with improving its quality so that it functions better as a self-sustaining system that, in return, enriches human experiences.

The Issues

The issues that arise in the creation of any urban design project are embedded in a series of questions: What makes a good city? Who should decide? Once decisions are made, who should be responsible for implementing them? Is a good city the product of a whole set of individual decisions largely uncoordinated, or does one attempt to coordinate them? What are the opportunity costs for working one way or another? Implicit in each case study included in this book are specific answers to these questions.

Secondarily: How far should the controlling authority (public or private) go in defining the specification of ends and means? What are the limits, if any, to the rights of individual developers and their architects to build what they want, where they want, and how they want? What is in the public interest? Indeed, what is the public interest? It has been notoriously difficult to define. Presumably, the goal is to design for the welfare of all concerned but, at best, any design product should represent the interests of particular parties without harming the interests of others.

Thirdly (although in an age of fiscal pragmatism one might argue that it is the primary issue), is the concern for return on capital invested. In capitalist societies, property developers (private or public) take the lead or have to be coerced into building the city

piece-by-piece. One of the objectives of urban design is indeed to ensure fiscal responsibility. Another is to develop carrots and sticks through incentives and penalties for developing cities in particular ways in order to create specific facilities in specific locations.

Fourthly: How is development to be phased? Where does one begin? How disrupted will be the lives of those who inhabit the first phase as the project moves into another phase of construction? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that those people's lives are disturbed as little as possible? This book shows through case studies how architects, landscape architects, and city planners have addressed these issues in varying urban design projects in differing socio-political contexts.

Commentary

Urban design involves *designing*. Urban designing requires collaborative work dealing with planning, landscape architecture, and architectural concerns, as well as that of various types of engineering in a politically volatile context that makes decision making difficult and, often, highly stressful.

Many observers (for example, Schurch 1999) see urban design existing at the intersect of the domain of the three main professions concerned with the layout of the environment—architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning—to which I have added civil engineering as shown in Figure 1.3a. This position is accepted here. All the design professions, however, claim urban design as their own. Urban design while overlapping these fields has developed its own area of expertise. Its relationship to the traditional design fields now looks more like that in Figure 1.3b.

Urban design, as a field of professional endeavor, draws on the expertise of the three traditional design fields but it differs from them in that it has become more development oriented, more socially oriented, and more conscious of the political economy in which it is embedded, as well as of the volatile nature of decision making in the political arena. Professionals with a committed interest in urban design are, because no one else is doing it, slowly developing their own empirical knowledge base, their own organizations, and their own journals. This book focuses on their professional efforts and has sought to outline, for the moment at least, the scope of concern of urban design as one vehicle for improving city life as it evolves.

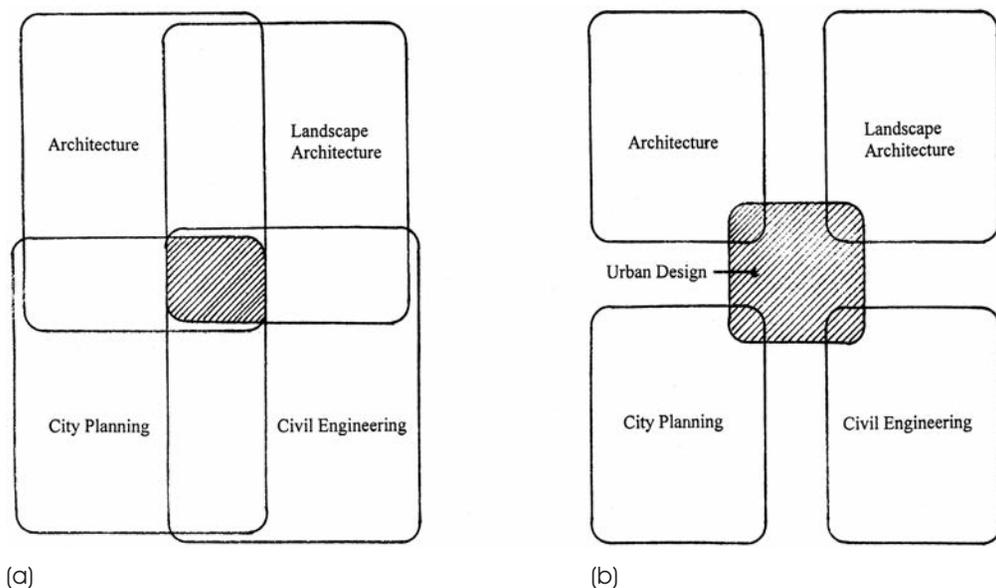


FIGURE 1.3
The relationship of urban design to the traditional design fields. (a) The traditional view of urban design; (b) urban design today?

References

- Barker, Roger (1968) *Ecological Psychology: Concepts and Methods for Studying Human Behavior*, Stanford: University of Stanford Press.
- DoE [Department of the Environment] (1997) *General Policy and Principles*, London: The authors.
- Fosler, R. Scott and Renee A. Berger (eds) (1982) *Public-Private Partnerships in American Cities: Seven Case Studies*, Lexington: Lexington Books.
- Frieden, Bernard J. and Lynne B. Sagalyn (1991) *Downtown Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gibson, James J. (1979) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Harvey, David (2003) Social justice, postmodernism and the city, in Alexander Cuthbert (ed.) *Critical Readings on Urban Design*, Oxford: Blackwell, 59–63.
- Istrate, Emilia and Robert Puentes (2011) Moving forward on public private partnerships: US and international experiences with PPP units, *Brookings-Rockefeller Project on State and Metropolitan Innovation* (December), www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2011/12/08%20transportation%20istrate%20puentes/1208_transportation_istrate_puentes.pdf, accessed March 2, 2015.
- Izumi, Kiyo (1968) Some psycho-social considerations of environmental design, mimeographed.
- Kohane, Peter and Michael Hill (2001) The eclipse of the commonplace idea: decorum in architectural theory, *Architectural Research Quarterly* 5 (10), 63–77.
- Lang, Jon (1994) *Urban Design: The American Experience*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Lang, Jon and Nancy Marshall (2016) Public, quasi-public and semi-public squares, in *Urban Squares as Places, Links and Displays: Successes and Failures*, New York: Routledge, 51–60.
- Lang, Jon and Walter Moleski (2010) Functionalism updated, in *Functionalism Revisited: Architectural Theory and Practice and the Behavioral Sciences*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 63–72.
- Le Corbusier (1960) *My Work*, translated from the French by James Palmer, London: Architectural Press.
- Lewis, Nigel C. (1977) A procedural framework attempting to express the relationship of human factors to the physical design process, unpublished student paper, Urban Design Program, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
- Low, Setha and Neil Smith (eds) (2006) *The Politics of Public Space*, New York: Routledge.
- Madanipour, Ali (1996) *Design of Urban Space: An Inquiry into a Socio-spatial Process*, Chichester: John Wiley.
- Maslow, Abraham (1987) *Motivation and Personality* (3rd edn) revised by Robert Fraeger, James Fadiman, Cynthia McReynolds, and Ruth Cox, New York: Harper & Row.
- Rapoport, Amos (1997) Social organization and the built environment, in Tim Ingold (ed.) *Companion Encyclopaedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture and Social Life*, Abingdon: Routledge, 460–502.
- Schurch, Thomas W. (1999) Reconsidering urban design: thoughts about its definition and status as a field or profession, *Journal of Urban Design* 4 (1), 5–28.
- Stamps, Arthur E. (1994) Validating contextual urban design principles, in S. J. Neary, M. S. Symes, and F. E. Brown (eds) *The Urban Experience: A People-Environment Perspective*, London: E & F N Spon, 141–53.

Further Reading

- Campbell, Heather and Robert Mitchell (2002) Utilitarianism's bad breath? A re-evaluation of the public interest justification for planning, *Planning Theory* 1 (2), 163–87.
- Carmona, Matthew, Tim Heath, Taner Oc, and Steve Tiesdell (2003) *Public Places, Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design*, Oxford: Architectural Press.
- Frieden, Bernard J. (1990) Public-private development: dealing making in the public interest, *Center* 6, 26–35.
- Held, Virginia (1970) *The Public Interest and Individual Interests*, New York: Basic Books.