



The Comyn Ching triangle off Seven Dials presents a striking corner, with an interior court opened up as public space (Terry Farrell & Partners)



One of the most important tenets of good urbanism is for buildings to give positive definition to the shape and function of outdoor space, and for this outdoor space to be designed to encourage a range of activities to take place. Buildings contribute to the public domain - encouraging people to meet, talk and linger.

The detailed design of urban space means attending to the building line and three-dimensional mass that helps create the character of streets and squares, later brought to life with planting, street furniture, public art and the whole host of other ingredients that give these spaces their warmth and vitality (see 5.5).

Much of our built heritage shows how this was part of the evolution of our towns and cities. In medieval times, buildings grew around the established paths and routes. The Georgian Square, street or circus or the great avenues and boulevards were laid out before the buildings. The space came first. This approach continued through into the earlier years of this century. Often places we love have a quite chaotic historical jumble of buildings, but they have come to define the space.

This tradition has got rather lost, and for a number of reasons. British architectural education has tended to concentrate on buildings and rather ignored the fact that buildings define spaces; and it is the quality of the public realm above all that we either enjoy or suffer. The social responsibility of buildings to contribute positively to civic life has often been neglected. Accommodating the motor vehicle has also produced a whole range of qualitative difficulties, as discussed in Chapter 4 - manifest in highway design standards, parking requirements, signage or safety measures. Planning standards for transport, privacy, or zoning purposes, for example, have added to the panoply of 'compliance' measures that the designer is obliged to fulfil. There is thus a tendency to finish up dealing with space 'left-over' after planning, highway and building considerations have been dealt with.

The approach advocated here is a return to the pre-eminence of the quality of the urban space - whether the avenue, street, square, mews or local park.