

Chapter 1

The use and nature of public space

This first chapter introduces the concept of public space and seeks to explore the complexity of both public space as a concept, its use and users, and the management of public space as an aspiration and set of activities. The chapter is in three parts. In the first section, the inspirations and objectives underpinning the writing of the book are presented in order to establish the purpose of the book, and equally its limitations. A brief overview of how the book is structured is included here. This is followed by a second section in which public space is deconstructed. This is done in order to draw out and understand the physical and human components of urban public space, in other words, the subjects of management. The third section draws out and discusses the welter of roles and responsibilities for actually managing public space.

The chapter begins the process of unpacking (at least conceptually) the issues that provide the focus for the rest of the book.

The book

Inspirations and objectives

In recent years there has been considerable and growing interest amongst academics worldwide concerning the role of public spaces in urban life. Works emanating from disciplines such as geography, cultural studies, politics, criminology, planning and architecture have tried to define and explore that role, and understand current changes and their consequences. In part, it would seem, this interest was sparked by the almost complete absence of interest in the subject amongst the policy community in many parts of the world in the last decades of the twentieth century, and the impact this disinterest has had.

But recent research has demonstrated that people place the quality of their local environment high on the agenda of issues that concern them and most need improving, and often higher than the 'headline' public services such as education and health (MORI 2002 – Figure 1.1).

This reflects the fact that people use the street outside their front door, their local neighbourhood and the environment around their workplace on a daily basis, and as a result, the quality of streets, parks and other public spaces affects everyone's daily life, and directly contributes to their sense of wellbeing.

Yet, in many parts of the world, considerable evidence has been gathered to demonstrate a shared sense of dissatisfaction and pessimism about the state of urban environments, particularly with the quality of everyday public spaces. Explanations for this dissatisfaction have emphasised the poor quality of design that characterises many new public spaces; spaces that are typically dominated by parking, roads infrastructure, introspective buildings, a poor sense of place, and which in different ways, for different groups in society, are often exclusionary.

However, the research upon which this book draws suggests that this is not the whole story. Many contemporary and historic spaces are well designed but have nevertheless experienced decline and neglect. In part this is because the services and investment upon which the continuing quality of those spaces depends have been subject to the same constraints and pressures as public services in general. Changes in the roles of the state and civil society, of government and the governed, shifts in modes of provision of public services, and so forth, have all played a part. These issues touch upon the management of public space, and reflect the impact (positive or negative) of the many different activities that constantly define and redefine the characteristics and quality of that space.