

The basis of the book

The book draws upon four empirical research projects as well as a wide body of literature to examine questions of public space management on an international stage. The first project examined the management of everyday urban public spaces in England, the second, the management of green parks and open spaces in eleven cities around the world, the third, three iconic public spaces in New York and London, and the fourth, real users' perceptions and aspirations for public space in England. The empirical research is set within a context of theoretical debates about public space, its history, contemporary patterns of use and its changing nature in Western society, and about new management approaches that are increasingly being adopted as a response to public space problems in an evolving urban governance scenario.

In undertaking the research over a period of five years, the authors have become increasingly aware that despite the many critiques of public space, its generation and evolution, and despite the voluminous tomes on how to design new public space, relatively little academic literature exists on the subject of its long-term management. In a very real sense, public space management has been a forgotten dimension of the policy discourse, perhaps because so many of the solutions are, on the face of it, quite prosaic: designing with maintenance in mind; regular street cleaning; coordinating management responsibilities; and so forth. Yet, proper management, or the absence of it, can impact in a profound way on the key urban qualities that other policy areas increasingly espouse: connection; free movement; provision of social space; health and safety; public realm vitality; and the economic viability of urban areas.

The four projects were an attempt to understand these issues. In reporting on them, the book addresses one of the big cross-disciplinary debates: how to deal more effectively with the quality of public spaces? In the process it aims to forward a range of practical and sometimes more fundamental solutions to better manage public space.

Defining public space ... and the research limitations

Unfortunately, debates about public space are situated within a literature characterised by a host of overlapping and poorly defined terms: liveability, quality of place, quality of life, environmental exclusion/equity, local environmental quality, physical capital, well-being, and even urban design and sustainability. These are all concepts that overlap and which are often used as synonyms, but equally are frequently contrasted, or used as repositories in which almost anything fits (van Kamp *et al.* 2003: 6; Brook Lyndhurst 2004a).

Broadly, the different concepts owe their origins to different policy-making traditions, each being multi-dimensional and multi-objective. Thus Rybczynski (1986, cited in Moore 2000) describes them as being like an onion: 'It appears simple on the outside, but it's deceptive, for it has many layers. If it is cut apart there are just onion-skins left and the original form has disappeared. If each layer is described separately, we lose sight of the whole'. To add to the complexity, some aspects are clearly subjective, related to the way places are perceived and to how individual memories and meanings attach to and inform perception of particular places. Others are objective, and concerned with the physical and indisputable realities of place (Massam 2002:145; Myers 1987: 109).

Van Kamp *et al.* (2003: 11) usefully distinguish between the various concepts by arguing that some are primarily related to the environment, whilst others are primarily related to the person (liveability and quality of place being in the former camp, and quality of life and well-being in the latter). Moreover, some concepts are clearly future-oriented (i.e. sustainability), whilst others are about the here and now (i.e. liveability and environmental equity).

What is clear is that the quality of the physical environment, and therefore physical public space and space as a social milieu, relates centrally to each of these, yet each is also much broader than a concern for public space management. In this regard, defining public space too widely may result in a nebulous concept that is difficult for those charged with its management to address. Conversely, defining the concept too narrowly may exclude important areas for action which, once omitted from policy, may undermine the overall objective of delivering better managed public space.

Debates about the nature and limits of public space will be discussed in some depth later in the book (see in particular Chapters 2 and 3), but for the purposes of defining the limits of this book it is worth presenting, up front, the definition adopted in the various research projects on which Part Two of the book is based. Two definitions are offered. First, an all-encompassing definition of public space that defines the absolute limits of the subject area, and second, the narrower definition, that was adopted as the focus of the empirical research.

A broad definition of public space could be constructed as follows:

Public space (broadly defined) relates to all those parts of the built and natural environment, public and private, internal and external, urban and rural, where the public have free, although not necessarily unrestricted, access. It encompasses: all the streets, squares and other rights of way, whether predominantly in residential, commercial or community/civic uses; the open spaces and parks; the open countryside; the 'public/private'