

## Chapter 9

# One iconic civic space

## Managing Times Square, New York

This chapter and the one that follows take a detailed look at well-known and iconic civic spaces to explore how a management regime impacts on users' experience of those spaces. The discussion centres on the greater involvement of private interests in the management of public space and its associated trends towards commodification, control and exclusion. The first part of this chapter outlines the recent history of Times Square in New York and puts its transformation into a business improvement district (BID) into context. It summarises what this has meant for the management of that space. The second part looks at the physical and symbolic characteristics of the space, the way it is used, and how these aspects are affected by the management regime. This part first explores the shape of the place, its legibility, land uses and signage as the system of codes that structure the visual and sensorial experience of Times Square. A micro-analysis of the public space is then undertaken including of the uses and activities it fosters, and how management affects the traditional roles of fostering a sense of civility and community. The chapter highlights the complexity of the relationship between private-led management and the use of space, and the varied and to some extent unpredictable outcomes that result.

### A focus on iconic civic space

In this and the following chapter the discussion moves from the models and practices of public space management to a more detailed examination of how emerging design and management practices interact with the characteristics of particular public spaces: physical, sensorial and functional. The two previous chapters focused on a particular type of public space from the typology in Chapter 3 – public open space. To

balance the evidence, these chapters switch the focus to a further type of public space – urban civic spaces (see Table 3.1). This type encompasses the great civic spaces of our cities as well as the everyday streets and spaces that make up so much of the public realm. In these chapters, extreme, iconic, examples of the type are deliberately chosen as a means to focus on the types of public space trends that preoccupy so much of the literature discussed in Part One of the book. The choice further balances the evidence by contrasting the management of these spaces with that of the everyday spaces discussed so far in Part Two of the book.

As discussion in Chapter 3 demonstrated, most of the literature on contemporary public space suggests that economic and social change in the later part of the twentieth century has fundamentally altered the nature and character of that space. Indeed, many of the critiques of contemporary public space are rather pessimistic, contending that it no longer plays the role of an open and inclusive space for social, political and cultural exchange, and that instead it has been taken over by exclusionary, commodified, delocalised interests of a predominantly private and corporate nature.

Chapter 3 discussed at some length the key elements of that critique of contemporary public space, from the dominance of private transportation, to the privatisation, commodification and homogenisation of key public spaces. As was revealed there, the emergence of what characterises contemporary public space is linked to changes in the economy and society – the globalisation of late capitalism, mass consumption and the advent of the 'risk society' (Beck 1992). As a result, public spaces and especially the high-profile ones previously associated with civic or communitarian functions have become a valuable commercial commodity. Moreover, the creation of easily recognisable, safe and visually and commercially attractive spaces has become an instrument in the competition among