



1.4 Inadvertent impacts: the humble wheelie bin

build social capital; as a venue for economic exchange and element in determining economic competitiveness and investment decisions; as an environmental resource and direct influence on energy use; and as an important contributor to the liveability of urban places and influence on the health and well-being of local populations.

The nature of public space

Of course not all public space is deteriorating and much is well-designed and managed. Nevertheless, if a general perception exists that the 'quality' of public space is deteriorating, then it can be argued that it is beholden on those responsible for its up-keep to understand why this is so, and what can be done about it. It may be, for example, that a lack of understanding of the nature of public space is a root cause behind the deterioration, perhaps because the delivery of space quality does not feature as a significant objective of many key stakeholders (see below).

It seems that in order to manage public space more efficiently, there has been a tendency to carve up the field into smaller units of responsibility, sometimes contracted out to a multitude of private contractors. This has replaced multi-tasking and holistic approaches to public space management that were epitomised in the guise of, for example, the park keeper or estate caretaker. A consequence seems to be the loss of key individuals who take an overview across all the elements of public space and its management, and a culture of delivering only what is specifically contracted or specified. This issue of the disaggregation of responsibilities for public space and its management will be a key theme, supported through empirical evidence, that is returned to throughout the book.

For now, the failure to understand the connections between different public space management objectives can be illustrated by way of a simple example effecting residential streets throughout the UK. Efficient refuse collection is a vitally important component in managing the urban environment by keeping streets sanitary and clean. In order to more efficiently (and cheaply) manage this process, many local authorities have given their residents wheelie bins that not only securely hold significant quantities of rubbish (so avoiding the problem of rubbish spilling onto streets), but also allow operatives to clear rubbish with less chance of injuries to themselves. Despite these benefits, in some environments



1.5 A standards-based approach to public space design

where houses open directly onto the street, the inadvertent side effect has been a negative impact on the urban environment as wheelie bins come to visually dominate the street scene, as pavement space for play is reduced, and as accessibility, particularly for those with disabilities, is compromised (see Figure 1.4).

The illustration demonstrates the need to carefully consider the impact of one policy decision upon others, to consider their impact in different contexts, and to be able to predict where conflicts might occur. In other words, to make the connections.

The illustration also demonstrates the need for a deep awareness of outcomes, the optimisation of which might be seen as the first and overriding public space management objective, but which needs managers who understand the interlinkages between different policy responses. Unfortunately, it seems that rather than skilling-up to meet the challenges, coping methods have often been found to simply avoid the worst effects of contemporary public space pressures, whilst still maintaining functionality. The inevitable result is the crude application of standards-based approaches to service delivery: planning and highways standards, road adoption specifications, police 'designing out crime' principles, accessibility regulations, road safety markings and signage, corporate street furniture, public transport infrastructure, and so forth, with little real understanding of the overall impact (Figure 1.5). This question of skills will also be returned to throughout the book.

A DESIGN-LED MANAGEMENT PROCESS?

Some have argued that what is required is a design-led approach to public space management in order that the complexities are fully understood. In England, the government-convened Urban Task Force (1999) contended that 'More than 90 per cent of our urban fabric will be with us in 30 years time' and that as a consequence this is where the real 'urban quality' challenge lies, rather than with the much smaller proportion of newly designed spaces created each year. They argued, however, that the way spaces look and feel today and the ease with which they can be managed relates fundamentally to how they were designed in the first place. Moreover, because every subsequent intervention in space (following its initial development) has an impact upon its overall quality, the importance of design skills remains fundamental.