1.6 The dimensions of public space character

This does not imply that all those involved in the management of public space need to be designers in an artistic sense, and some have argued that the over-design of spaces to the detriment of other factors can be problematic when much everyday space is often (and quite appropriately) banal or untidy in order to be functional and versatile, for example, street markets (Worpole and Knox 2007: 3). It does imply, however, that interventions (no matter how small) should be considered creatively and sensitively, involving weighing-up and balancing options and impacts in order to find the 'optimum' given solution within the constraints set by context and resources. As the wheelie bin example indicates (alongside countless other more significant public space management decisions taken every day), this frequently does not happen.

Focusing on the issue, the Urban Design Skills Working Group (2001) argued that rectification of the problem must begin with four things:

- on the demand side, reawakening the public's interest in the quality of public space through adequate community participation and the stimulation of grassroots involvement;
- on the supply side, increasing the skills base available to design and produce better places;
- reaching a position where local authorities make use of those skills in administering their functions;
- bridging the divide between the different disciplines concerned with the built environment by focusing on the common ground – the public realm.

However, given the range and diversity of activities required to successfully manage public space (see below), it may be that for the majority of those involved, all that is required is an 'awareness' of their role in, and responsibilities to, the overall and ongoing design process. For others, a more complete understanding of the total urban environment and all the contributions to its upkeep is necessary in order to establish

a vision, define the roles and responsibilities of constituent services, and reconcile possible conflicts.

This is likely to require a good understanding of the nature and complexity of public space, which, for the purposes of this book, is conceptualised in terms of three key dimensions that together define its character (Figure 1.6):

- the key elements that constitute public space – in other words, the 'kit of parts';
- the particular characteristics of public spaces – the 'qualities' that different spaces possess;
- the range of socio/economic and physical/spatial contexts – or the 'context for action'.

A similar division was used by Bell (2000: 21) in her work developing Urban Amenity Indicators for New Zealand in which she usefully distinguishes between 'amenity attributes', representing the tangible and measurable elements, and 'amenity values', or the less tangible perceptions people have about these. In each case, she argues, context it vital: 'We all know what amenity means to us, but it means different things to different people depending on where we live work and play'. In England, government guidance on design also adopts a similar division (DETR and CABE 2000). As well as defining seven 'Objectives for Urban Design', the guidance distinguishes between eight 'Aspects of Development Form' to which the objectives relate, and argues that the patterning together of the two in different places can help in understanding the local context and therefore in drawing up appropriately responsive policy and guidance frameworks for different areas.

The kit of parts

Starting therefore with the 'kit of parts', this first element of public space character is on the face of it the most basic, representing the constituent components of public space. Taking a pseudo-morphological approach to the character of public space (see Carmona *et al.* 2003: 61–6), it is possible to envisage a kit of parts that disaggregates space into four key elements (Box 1.1):

1 buildings
2 landscape (hard and soft)
3 infrastructure
4 uses.