The issue of time also distinguishes the different elements of the kit of parts, as the buildings and much of the infrastructure will tend to change only very slowly over long periods of time, emphasising, with regard to its long-term management, the need to get the design right in the first place. By contrast, elements of the landscape, and in some environments the uses in and surrounding external public space, will tend to change more quickly (Buchanan 1988: 33). It is these elements that can have the most decisive short-term impact on the way public space is perceived by its users. Therefore, although at any one time most of the physical environment already exists and changes only very slowly, the way the different elements are cared for, and the impact of those elements that change most frequently – the paving, street furniture, shop-fronts, signage, soft landscaping, building uses, and public space activities, etc. – are likely to be decisive in determining users' perceptions of quality.

Moreover, in an evermore complex built environment, the 'kit of parts' that contemporary public spaces need to accommodate have increased dramatically, whilst the intensity with which many spaces are used and the hours in the day over which activities happen have also multiplied. The result is inevitable conflicts that are difficult to resolve and which can undermine quality (Audit Commission 2002a: 3–5). This is hardly surprising when one considers the range of functions that many streets and spaces accommodate:

1 pedestrian thoroughfares
2 traffic arteries
3 retail destinations
4 market venues
5 venues for civic functions
6 places of relaxation
7 places to congregate
8 venues for public and political meetings
9 places for cultural exchange
10 opportunities for car parking
11 gateways to the private realm
12 places for social interaction
13 servicing arteries (gas, water, electric, cable, telephone)
14 play spaces
15 venues for eating and drinking
16 public transport arteries (bus, tram, taxis)
17 containers for landscaping
18 sources of information and communication (signs, advertisements, public phones)
19 opportunities for building servicing
20 breaks for light, sun and air penetration..

Examples of conflict include: between the needs of drivers and public transport versus the needs of pedestrians; the needs of utility providers to supply and maintain underground infrastructure versus the space required for street trees to grow and flourish; or the needs of commercial and entertainment premises versus the needs of local residents for peace and quiet. When the functions that spaces accommodate conflict, the overall quality of the space is often the first casualty. The challenge is therefore to manage the conflicts whilst enhancing quality and maintaining functionality. This question of managing conflict within public space represents another overarching theme of the book.

Public space qualities

Awareness of the kit of parts is by itself of little value without an awareness of how the parts are patterned together to optimise the 'qualities' of public space that make it conducive to human activity. The influential Copenhagen-based architect Jan Gehl (credited with the transformation of much of his own city) has argued that public space activities are particularly important in perceptions of public space. They are also particularly sensitive to the physical quality of environments. Gehl (1996) has characterised outdoor activities into three categories:

- necessary activities that we have to engage in – walking to work or school, waiting for a bus, shopping for food, etc.;
- optional activities that we choose to do if the time and place is conducive – walking for the sake of it, watching the world go by, sunbathing, window shopping, sitting at a pavement cafe, etc.;
- resultant (social) activities which are dependent on the presence of others in public space – children playing, casual greetings, conversations, communal activities, etc.; social activities are resultant because they occur spontaneously as a direct result of the other two forms of activity.

Based on extensive research across the world, Gehl has concluded that necessary activities are influenced only slightly by the physical quality of the environment because they are necessary for life to continue. Optional activities, by contrast, only take place when conditions are optimal, and are therefore a direct barometer of the quality of public space. They also effect users' perception of space because if people are choosing to stay in spaces rather than hurrying through, the space itself seems more 'liveable'. Finally, social activities happen whatever the physical context, although their quality and intensity will be affected by both the numbers of people in a space, and by the extent to which the quality of space encourages users to linger.