

- 5 These four types of process each break down into a wide range of actions that those with public space management responsibilities engage in, and which are distributed across the range of public services.

The matrix is represented in Figure 11.1. The aspirational objective should be for all stakeholders to play their part in instigating processes and delivering outcomes that continue to change the character of public space for the better. This, however, will need to start by understanding the complexity itself, and the web of interconnected aspirations, processes, services and stakeholders that collectively manage (or not) public space. Mapping this web of connections for an indicative English local authority (see Figures 11.2–11.5), it is easy to understand why the connections so often are not made, and why the quality of public space continues to suffer.

Some lessons from history

This complexity is nothing new. As the brief review of public space through history contained in Chapter 2 revealed, a rich variety of functions, themes and meanings have always characterised public space. Indeed, a powerful lesson from history was that in providing for the multifarious needs of urban populations at large, public spaces are bound to contain a certain element of disorder and tension, and that this is part of the rich mix that makes public space eternally varied and fascinating. Conversely, a recurring struggle against disorder in public space has also long been a feature of urban management strategies, a struggle that takes many different forms, including, at its most extreme, pressures for privatisation, conformity, and exclusion. Positively, the history also suggests it can encourage civility, a sense of pride, aesthetic fulfilment, and help to facilitate economic, social and political exchange.

In retrospect, historic public space has often been idealised, depicting a much greater inclusiveness and participation than actually existed, something that has influenced criticism of the management of contemporary public space. This tendency to look back with rose-tinted spectacles had been exacerbated in recent years by the undoubted impact of mass consumption and globalisation that characterises post-industrial economies. These find expression in perceived pressures for a more actively managed public realm, and a homogenisation in the character of public space.

Throughout history, the dominant issue dictating management strategies has been (and remains) the balance between public and private power and responsibilities, with private interests often seeking to mould or even remove public space to meet their own commercial and social objectives. Equally, even the most perfunctory analysis of public space

through the ages would reveal that this use of power to favour the interests of some groups over others has not always been one way, and that the state and its organisations has often been the instigator of practices designed to both control and exclude. It would also reveal the massive impact of management, as opposed to original design, on how public space is used and perceived, and, as a result, on how the quality and users of space can change – often dramatically – over time.

The changing forms of public space

Another relatively recent lesson from history relates to the form that public space takes, and to the explosion in the twentieth century of forms of public space that go against the centuries of producing ‘positive’ spaces that act as places for exchange, as well for communication. Instead, the spread of modernism, and more recently the all-pervasive impact of private transportation, has generated a range of new public space types, many of which are entirely ‘negative’ (as far as the experience they offer to people on the ground), and which throw up a diversity of new management challenges.

In Chapter 3, a new typology of public space was offered that demonstrates this complexity (see Table 3.1). Twenty distinct types of urban public space were classified, four of which are ‘negative’ forms of space, ten are ambiguous in terms of their role and ownership, and three are entirely private. Increasingly the negative and ambiguous forms of space have come to dominate the contemporary urban landscape, breaking down the sharp traditional divisions between public and private, and in so doing blurring boundaries between management responsibilities. Today, cities are made up of a patchwork of management responsibilities, reflecting in turn the patchwork of public space types, and requiring as a result a far more integrated, negotiated and nuanced approach to public space management than has been the case in the recent past.

Critiquing public space

It is perhaps the absence of such approaches, however, that is leading to the overwhelmingly negative critiques of public space seen in the literature and explored in Chapter 3. In summary, those responsible for the design and management of contemporary public space have been criticised for:

- neglecting public space, both physically and in the face of market forces;
- sacrificing public space to the needs of the car, effectively allowing movement needs to usurp social ones;