

- allowing fear of crime and the stranger to dominate public space design and management strategies;
- failing to address the needs of the least mobile and most vulnerable in society;
- allowing public space to be commercialised and privatised, with a knock-on impact on political debate and social exclusion;
- failing to halt a retreat from public space into domestic and virtual space
- condoning the spread of a placeless formulae-driven entertainment space;
- generally presiding over a homogenisation of the public built environment in the face of the relentless forces of globalisation.

Given that the critiques (particularly the first three) are so widely and consistently made, it is hardly surprising that private interests are choosing to turn their back on public space in favour of the more controlled, specialised and ambiguous forms of space that are increasingly seen across the Western world. But whether these critiques are any more pertinent today than in the past remains a moot point, with arguments also made that the reported decline in the quality of public space has been much exaggerated. Instead, counter arguments go that we are simply seeing new forms of contemporary space that, although different, are not necessarily any less worthy or valuable than those they displace, and which reflect (as public space has always done) the fragmentation and complexities of society.

Whether this is accepted or not, the challenge for the managers of public space is to work with the new forms of space and the increasing diversity of stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes within any given context. The best outcomes may very well be those that use management strategies to overcome the critiques that are prevalent in the literature, and to do that, the critiques themselves must be aired, debated and understood.

A new governance context

Notwithstanding the relevance of the key critiques, the debate often tends to assume a somewhat dichotomous view of the complex history and dynamics of urban government, and overlooks the complex processes through which rights, roles and attributions regarding public spaces are continually defined and re-defined. In fact the meaning and function of public spaces, their forms of management, and the distribution of power and responsibilities over both are all contingent on the historical context of places and their governing practices.

Therefore, as argued in Chapter 4, recent trends in the management of public spaces need to be seen as part of the context-specific process

whereby 'government' is being replaced by 'governance'. Changes to public space management can therefore also be understood as the re-shaping of the specific sets of institutional arrangements structuring this field of policy, and that this is happening in a context of more general changes to urban governance more widely. Today, no one single social actor can claim to have all the solutions for the policy problems at hand, and the management of public space can no longer be seen as the exclusive, or even necessarily the natural, province of the public sector.

Changes in public space management are therefore a reflection of wider changes in the relationship between government, especially local government, and society, including both community and private interests. This embedding of public space management changes into wider changes in urban governance provides a framework for understanding the positive and negative potential implications. It raises the possibility that governing routines and coordinating mechanisms that have served public space needs well in one particular context and time might have become a problem under different conditions.

The management response

Despite the changes and debates over who legitimates it, and how, the purpose of public space management has not changed, and was defined in the book as

the set of processes and practices that attempt to ensure that public space can fulfil all its legitimate roles, whilst managing the interaction between, and impacts of, those multiple functions in a way that is acceptable to its users.

Within this broad definition, public space management was subdivided into four key interlinked processes – coordination, investment, regulation and maintenance – reflected in Figure 11.1 and discussed in Chapter 4.

These processes apply whichever organisation(s) or sector(s) is/are delivering the actual services. But increasingly, the evidence suggests that the highly specialised and fragmented models of local government that had grown up from the middle of the twentieth century were increasingly serving the management of public space poorly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Thus although the activities that make up the various functions of managing public space largely existed in local government, public space itself was rarely an explicit policy focus. More often than not it was simply the context within which a range of disparate management activities occurred, and public space as a concept was often limited to the parks and iconic civic spaces that make up only a tiny portion of the public realm.