develop appropriate management responses. The lessons above derive from a broad cross-section of experiences from around the world, but wherever they are implemented, it will be important to ask: have we understood properly what people really want?

A final empirical research study, conducted as the book was being compiled, concluded that actually it is the run-of-the-mill issues that dominate the concerns of everyday users, across social scales, and that largely these pertain to the run-of-the-mill, everyday types of public space that exist all around us (Carmona and de Magalhães 2007). The project focused on the measurement of local environmental quality, including, but going beyond, public space, and building on the foundation provided by the research reported in this book. It asked:

- What are people's aspirations for the quality of their local environment?
- Which aspects are important and which are less so?
- Does this vary from context to context and community to community?

Research methodology

To address this part of the work, a qualitative survey of attitudes and aspirations involving 12 focus groups distributed geographically around the English regions was undertaken. Locations were chosen to take in communities from a range of socio-economic and physical contexts (inner city, suburban, rural), whilst groups were selected to reflect a balanced distribution of age, ethnicity, family circumstances (children or no children) and household type and tenure. Groups consisted of around eight residents, and were focused on establishing, first, the basic parameters by which people judge their local environment, and, second, what are realistic, meaningful and consistent definitions of acceptable standards.

A second stage of the work brought together key stakeholders (professional and political leaders) from the various communities involved in the research to discuss the perceptions emerging from the qualitative survey. Two workshops of this nature were undertaken, each comprising a half-day session with around 20 key people covering local councillors, local government officers, private contractors and representatives from community groups and interested NGOs. Both the focus groups and workshops used the 'universal positive qualities' for public space identified in Chapter 1 as the basis for discussion and analysis (see Table 1.2). These collectively summarise a broad range of inter-connected and inter-dependent dimensions of 'quality' as identified in the literature. They were used as a tool to 'drill down' beneath the surface of headline

environmental qualities, and to understand in some depth how the quality of public space is perceived.

What users really want

The focus groups revealed that people generally find it difficult to discuss qualities of their local public space in an abstract way, and found some qualities more difficult to understand than others, e.g. 'functional' (described for the purposes of the focus groups as 'can be used harmoniously for a variety of purposes'). Participants in the focus groups generally felt that many of the qualities overlapped, and often cross-referenced between the different qualities e.g. 'clean and tidy' and 'robust' (the latter described for the groups as 'well-maintained'). The professionals had a similar reaction, with some concern that terms would be difficult for their user communities to comprehend.

With prompting, however, both sets of participants (public and professionals) were able to grasp each of the 12 qualities and understand their importance. Although they sometimes had a different take on the qualities, they were nevertheless able to identify and articulate a range of sub-qualities or issues that each encompassed. As such, there was no quality that the participants regarded as unimportant, all qualities have significant merit, and all contribute to how public space is perceived. All were also seen as inter-related in complex and mutually reinforcing ways.

Despite this, some qualities were regarded as particularly significant in helping to improve or undermine the quality of people's lives. 'Clean and tidy', 'safe and secure' and fulfilling (understood by many in the focus groups as engendering a sense of 'community and belonging' were of this type. At the other end of the scale, qualities such as 'attractive', distinctive' and 'functional'[1] tended to be cited.

Partly explaining the priorities was a belief that some of the qualities related more to the initial design of an environment than to its subsequent management, and therefore that aspects of these concerns were fixed and not open to influence (at least in the short-term). The aesthetic quality and distinctiveness of buildings fell into this category (confirming the discussion of the 'kit of parts' in Chapter 1). Although it was recognised that such aspects contributed strongly to the quality of space, and residents either liked them or not, they did not feel able to change them, and therefore such concerns were not generally prioritised.

Focusing on the qualities singled out in the focus groups as either more or less important, with other qualities sitting somewhere in between, a hierarchy of qualities can be constructed (Figure 11.6). Seen in this way, some qualities might be regarded as more fundamental than others, although: