11.6 A hierarchy of universal positive qualities for public space

- it was clear that lower order concerns were not considered un-important, simply lower priorities;
- each of the lower order concerns were, in different ways, understood to be intimately related to the higher order ones;
- the more satisfied local communities are with their local environment, the more they focus on, and are critical of, the lower order concerns.

The true test of high-quality public space, therefore, will be one in which success in each of the qualities is achieved.

What standards of quality are expected

Answers to the more tricky question of what are or are not acceptable levels of quality were difficult to address during the research, with both the professional and non-professional audiences finding it hard to articulate what is or is not 'acceptable' in any given context. For professionals, levels of acceptability are dictated by public expectations which differ between contexts, and which are dictated by levels of resource, consultation, and, in some (more affluent) areas, by levels of complaints. For them, receipt of complaints means that levels of unacceptability are being reached; conversely, a lack of complaints signifies satisfaction.

However, the analysis of public aspirations and attitudes revealed the problematic nature of such assumptions. For many communities the research confirmed that levels of quality are not satisfactory, but are not so unacceptable that residents and users are driven to complain. In other words, they are resigned to accepting the level of quality that they are used to. Instead of articulating what is an acceptable quality for a particular dimension of the public space agenda, they tend to simply prioritise one quality over another; prioritisation that varies between individuals.

Whether residents should be able to drive levels of quality was open to debate, with some concerned that such activity inevitably shifts resources to more affluent places; a finding supported by research reported in Chapter 1. (Hastings *et al.* 2005: viii–ix). Others argue that services should be more responsive to resident demands and perceptions. Despite the debate and inherent difficulties, public consultation was seen by the professionals to be an essential tool for gauging levels of satisfaction with the local environment and with the provision of public space management services.

The difficulties experienced by professionals and the public alike in articulating how they judge levels of acceptability in the quality of the local environment meant that it was not possible to clearly identify commonly held perceptions of what exactly is 'quality'. Nevertheless, most of the non-professional participants were able to indicate the kind of factors that influenced whether they felt positively or negatively about
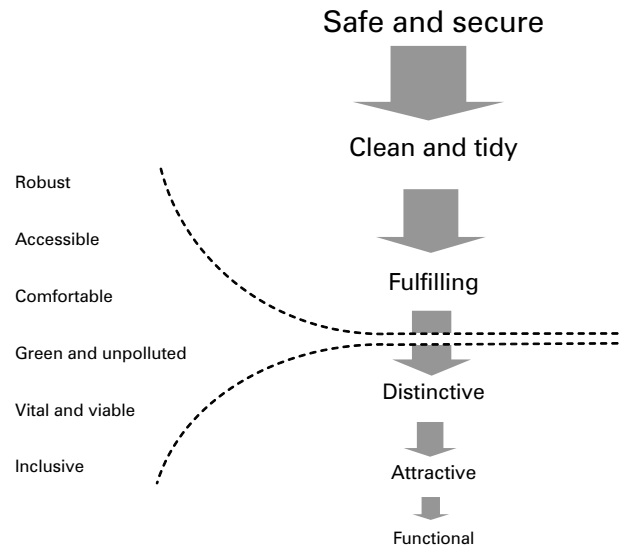
their neighbourhood. By contrast, the professional audiences found this difficult to do, seemingly often preferring to discuss definitions of the dimensions of quality, rather than levels or quality, and preferring to rely on user complaints rather than professional judgements to identify negative factors.

Table 11.1 summarises and compares views on acceptability across these two constituencies, summarising the range of positive and negative factors that were identified as being important in determining perceptions of local acceptability. The analysis revealed that a range of factors are noticeable by the regularity with which they feature in different categories, particularly the visual signals of how well a place is looked after:

- anti-social behaviour
- state of repair e.g. roads, street furniture, etc.
- general cleanliness
- levels of lighting
- availability of facilities for young people
- perceptions of security
- parking/traffic problems
- visual quality/greenery
- walkability/ease of movement
- feeling of community cohesion.

Other factors were noticeable by their absence, particularly any concerns for commercialisation, privatisation or homogenisation that so dominate much of the academic literature discussed in Chapter 3.

Moving practice forward

This final piece of research confirms one important conclusion from the research reported above, and adds three additional findings. It confirms, first, that many professionals continue to think in silos, and find holistic, cross-cutting concepts of public space quality difficult to engage with.