For them, places without these characteristics are likely to be alienating, uncomfortable or simply unusable, indicating that something is wrong with the design, management or both. Smith *et al.* (1997), based on an extensive analysis of place-based physical visions, developed a similar list of qualities that urban environments should fulfil: liveability, character, connection, mobility, personal freedom and diversity; whilst Carr *et al.* (1992: 87–136) conclude that five types of reason account for people's needs in public spaces: comfort, relaxation, passive engagement with the environment, active engagement, and discovery (the desire for stimulation), and that any one encounter with a place may satisfy more than one purpose. They argue,

> it is important to examine needs, not only because they explain the use of places, but also because use is important to success. Places that do not meet people's needs or that serve no important functions for people will be underused and unsuccessful.
>
> (Carr *et al.* 1992: 91–2)

Numerous physical prescriptions have also been established for what makes a good space. William Whyte (1980), for example, concluded his observations of public squares in New York with the following requirements, that:

- public spaces should be in a good location (preferably on a busy route and both physically and visually accessible);
- streets should be part of the 'social' space (cutting off a space from the street with railings or walls will isolate it and reduce its use);
- the space should be level or almost level with the pavement (spaces raised significantly above or below the pavement were less used);
- there should be places to sit – both integral (e.g., steps, low walls, etc.) and explicit (e.g., benches, seats, etc.);
- moveable seats facilitated choice and the opportunity to communicate character and personality.

Less important factors included sun penetration, the aesthetics of the space, and the shapes and sizes of spaces. By contrast Amos Rapoport (1990: 288) identified 36 supportive characteristics of successful street spaces that are almost all to do with their size and shape. These he grouped into six categories, successful streets are likely to: have high levels of enclosure; be narrow; have complex profiles (i.e. variation in width, turns and twists, subspaces, projections, etc.); have short blocked views; have highly articulated surfaces and enclosing elements; and be part of a complex pattern of routes and sequences of space.

Other writers, Bill Hillier (1996) for instance, have focused on the interconnectivity (visually and physically) of spaces as the key determinant of their functional success, whilst Jan Gehl (1996: 135), amongst others, has argued that all these factors – size, shape, connections, the disposition of elements within space, and their detailed design – are important in determining the quality of public space and therefore the types of human activities they will sustain. For him, moreover, all are both measurable and tangible.

INTANGIBLE QUALITIES

Despite the level of agreement across the literature, research undertaken by DEMOS (2005) has shown that many of the needs that determine how the public environment is perceived are often intangible, reflecting the diverse motivations, needs and resources available to different groups and users. Moreover, they argue the core ideal of public space being free and open to all is increasingly being undermined by a focus on safety, creating bland places with no real ability to draw or retain people. Elsewhere, environments are becoming 'specialised' in order to cater for diverse lifestyles, incomes, ages, ethnicities and tastes. The findings are particularly valuable in highlighting the dangers of over-emphasising particular qualities to the detriment of others, or of taking a narrow view of what constitutes the 'public environment'. Solutions include:

- spaces that enable users to participate in the space, by creating activities of their own;
- environments that encourage a diversity of user groups, and avoid domination by one group or use;
- creating spaces that were available 'on tap', at any time.

The research supports the historically important role of public space for social exchange, and suggests that non-traditional public spaces – the car-boot sale or skate park, for example – have an increasingly important role in encouraging socialisation, although the environmental qualities sought by users of such spaces may be very different from traditional public space.

Lloyd and Auld (2003) confirm the central importance of social space as a dimension of quality. For them, the extent to which environments encourage socialisation impacts directly on the quality of life of those who use them. In this regard, trends of commercialisation, privatisation and commodification in public spaces and facilities (see Chapter 3) can act to undermine this vital role by making the use of many spaces transitory, linked solely to commercial rather than social exchange. Their answer to the problem is the need, as they see it, to create or refurbish local environments, to make them conducive to social interactions that extend across successive visits. They argue that 'research must go beyond counting heads and observing