



1.9 The idealised three-way partnership

In reality, rarely will a single agency have overall responsibility to coordinate the actions of all the others. Even local government, which typically has a diverse range of powers, frequently fails to take a joined-up approach on such matters, even, as Chapter 5 will show, internally between different departments and services within the same authority. This is because the activities of different local government services are themselves driven by very different motivations; many of which do not relate to delivering a better quality environment.

Authorities responsible for highways, for example, are often primarily concerned with the efficient flow of traffic and with the safety of highways users (including pedestrians). Their approach is invariably to give vehicles precedence while pedestrians are kept behind a surfeit of signs, barriers and lights to keep them safe. Recent reviews of street quality (CABE and ODPM 2002; ICE 2002) have focused on these concerns, and argue that there is need for a clearer line of responsibility for public space, centring on local authorities.

But if local authorities take on a more central and coordinating role, then the contemporary context of multiple stakeholder roles and responsibilities suggests that this may only be successful if it also recognises the important role of the private sector and the community, alongside local government. A core three-way partnership of interests would seem to be critical (Figure 1.9).

Conclusions

This chapter has begun to unpack some of the complexity inherent in public space management by, first, exploring the nature and different dimensions of public space itself, and second, the network of those responsible, in theory, for its management. Although, to some, questions of how we manage public space may at first seem rather prosaic, this fails to grasp either the true nature of public space and how it profoundly impacts on peoples' daily lives across the world, or the web of inter-connecting roles and responsibilities that play a part in ensuring that this impact is a positive one.

Examination of actual public space management practice in Part 2 of the book will assess to what extent any partnership does exist, and in different contexts, where the balance of power lies. First, however, a historical perspective on public space is taken.