

## Chapter 2

# Public space through history

This chapter traces the evolution of Western urban public space through history from antiquity to modern times. Predominantly, the discussion is on the public square (and its variants) as a type of space, but the issues relate equally to the other forms of urban public space discussed elsewhere in the book. The first section outlines the complex evolution of public space in Europe, from the ancients through to the Renaissance and Baroque, and identifies the main functions of pre-modern European public space. The second and third sections focus on the 'modern' age, examining, respectively, a series of public spaces in London and then New York. A fourth section looks briefly at modernist space, and the recent return from there to designing more 'positive' urban space today. From the discussion, the complex and shifting relationships between spaces and their functions is identified, whilst the changing balance between public and private in the production, use and management of public space is drawn out. This is not a history book, but this brief look back helps to demonstrate how many of our contemporary preoccupations with the nature of public space in fact have very deep roots.

## European public space from antiquity to renaissance and baroque

The form and function of Western urban public space today has its origin in the ancient civilisations. The Greek polis started to flourish around the fifth century BC while the Roman city began to flourish around the third century BC, the two civilisations overlapping for some centuries. Both the Greeks and the Romans valued urban public space greatly as places for

social interaction, and this was epitomised in the aesthetic qualities that these spaces came to possess.

In modern times the result has been a tendency for many planners, architects and historians to eulogise the approach to public life these civilisations took. Most famously, Camillo Sitte, an Austrian architect disillusioned with the public space in his native Vienna around the turn of the nineteenth century, became a particular advocate of the ancient approach. Sitte (1889: 4) paid particular tribute to the public space of the ancient Greeks and Romans, arguing 'public squares, or plazas, were then of prime necessity, for they were the theatres for the principal scenes of public life'. Any history of Western public space should therefore begin with the ancients.

### The ancients

To understand how public space functioned in ancient Greek society, it is important to understand the Greek 'polis', or 'city-state'. LeGates and Stout (2000: 31) emphasise the importance of public space to life in the polis, arguing 'Public life was essentially communistic. The polis as a social institution defined the very nature of being human for its citizens', whilst the physical form of the polis stressed public space.

Public space in ancient Greece therefore had a crucial role in the politics of the polis, particularly as many were self-governing. As such, public space in the ancient Greek poli is often described as democratic space, a much cited example being the agora in ancient Athens where citizens could vote on issues of government and justice. However, governmental systems varied between poli, and over the course of the Greek civilisation, with some having monarchs or oligarchies. Moreover,