



2.5 Michelangelo's Renaissance Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome



2.6 Cheapside, showing a medieval market cross and multifunctional space

Renaissance and baroque

As the power of secular rulers and interests increased, from the middle of the fourteenth century new piazzas began to emerge in many Italian cities. As Girouard (quoted in Carr *et al.* 1961: 55) notes, 'the idea of a piazza expressing civic dignity and therefore unsuitable for commercial activities had clearly crystallised'. The grand piazzas of the renaissance sought to emulate the classical world, aesthetically and politically.

These ruling interests sought to 'regenerate' the medieval cities by employing artists and architects to beautify them, as well as their own grand palaces, and in the process to assert and display their own status and wealth (Figure 2.5). As Webb (1990: 68) observes, 'the link between art and power is as old as civilisation'. With the flourishing of the arts in fifteenth-century Italy, aesthetic principles, particularly scale and proportion, became essential in the design of urban space. Italian piazzas were beautified piecemeal from their medieval structure, or created afresh by the demolition of part of the town. Commercial traffic and markets were often banned from the centre, while architecture and sculpture reflected the monumental.

Royal patronage led to similar developments in baroque Spain, and the Spanish in the New World used principles of renaissance city planning drawn from the Laws of the Indies (Broadbent 1990: 42–8). Baroque Paris, again via royal patronage, built its first planned square in 1605, the Place Royal (now the Place des Vosges). Increasingly, therefore, the spaces that resulted were designed to display as publicly as possible, the status and wealth of the ruling classes. Again, the parallels are clear to see in the design of many contemporary public spaces, designed to show off the power and wealth of the corporate/business sector. The balance between public and private interests in the provision and management of public space represents an issue with very deep roots indeed.

Into the modern era 1: space types in London

This and the next section of the chapter outline three studies each from London and New York respectively, in the evolution of urban public space. The studies continue chronologically the history of urban public space and introduce contemporary case study material for London and New York that is picked up again later in the book (see Chapters 9 and 10).

The English marketplace: commerce and community

In most historic English towns today, the chief public space is the marketplace. Girouard (1990: 10) notes 'Many markets have been held in the same place for eight hundred years, and a few for over one thousand. The only centres of resort to rival them in age and importance are the churches'.

In 1600 there were approximately 800 market towns in England. The commercial success of marketplaces in medieval England ironically meant that the open space of the market began to be reduced (and privatised) as stalls evolved into the frontage of built shops (Girouard 1990: 11). Despite the loss of public space, the fact that markets were only held once or twice a week gave the marketplace the opportunity to host other functions. These were invariably other formal or informal public occasions when local people could interact in public life, often around the focus of the market cross. The marketplace was the centre for news and gossip in the town, as well as for buying and selling, and the market cross was the focal point of the market and therefore the town.

The market and the market cross were a crucial part of life for the English urban dweller in a similar way to the agora for the Greek citizen; it offered the urban dweller a chance to partake in public life: religious, political, commercial and informal. The market cross continued its civic development by becoming the market hall or town hall in many market towns as corporations, created by royal charter, replaced the authority