



2.22 Artistic space

First there should be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. ... Second, there must be eyes upon the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers ... must be orientated to the street. And third, the sidewalk must have users on continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in sufficient numbers.

(Jacobs 1961: 45)

Jacobs' text repeatedly cites the 'stranger' within public space, with reference to those who are not local residents she is familiar with. This term creates an element of suspicion and danger within public space, and moves the social argument through to a psychological one: the perception of danger or crime.

In another classic text, the anthropologist Edward T. Hall examined the psychological impact of urban space. With reference to modernism, Hall also criticised the mass urban renewal schemes of his native US which separated people from their cultural context, particularly blacks and latinos (Hall 1966: 155–8). Hall instead argued for public space that embraced the numerous cultural strands. 'One of man's most critical needs', he argued, was 'for principles for designing spaces that will maintain a healthy density, a healthy interaction rate, a proper amount of involvement, and a continuing sense of ethnic identification' (Hall 1969: 157).

In summary, critiques of modernist urban public space are numerous and diverse, and argue that the movement led to a homogenisation of spatial types, ignoring the social and psychological needs of an increasingly diverse city. The imposition of a uniform aesthetic vision produced space that divorced its users from history and culture, and too often rendered urban public space as functionless while disrupting social relationships and creating suspicion of strangers within it. The movement demonstrated both the fundamental impact that design can have on the use and viability of public space (in this case often negatively), but also, as a consequence, that an aesthetic vision of public space, to the exclusion of other factors, can be a very dangerous thing.

## The return to positive urban space

In the postmodern world, with the spread of an increasingly universal set of urban design principles (see Table 1.1), a general return to traditional urban space has been witnessed. Advocates argue that such urban space has the potential to support a range of complimentary social, economic and physical characteristics, such as the universal positive characteristics suggested in Table 1.2.

To achieve this, however, the modernist experiment has shown that it is first necessary to get the physical container correct, in order that the activities within can thrive. This is not to make a physically deterministic argument that the shape of the space will determine by itself the quality of the 'place' that emerges and the degree and type of human interaction, but it is to argue that some forms of space make it virtually impossible for meaningful human interaction to occur, and therefore for a strong (or any real) sense of place to emerge. Conversely, the right physical container will greatly increase the potential for a liveable local environment to be created and sustained (Bentley 1999: 125; 184).

Led by Le Corbusier who eschewed the use of traditional streets as 'oppressive' and constricting (quoted in Broadbent 1990: 129), the modernists rejected urban systems based on perimeter blocks (buildings defining spaces – Figure 2.23), and instead favoured freestanding buildings sitting in space. This allowed the buildings, rather than the public spaces, to take centre stage – 'object' rather than the 'ground' – and over time, through repetition of object-oriented building forms, shattered the urban block system. Lefebvre (1991: 303), described this as a 'fracturing of space' and concluded that the resulting disordering of elements was such that the urban fabric itself was also torn apart. Trancik (1986: 21) recognised that modernism itself had worthier ideals, but 'Somehow – without any conscious intention on anyone's part – the ideas of free flowing space and pure architecture have evolved into our present urban situation of individual buildings and isolated parking lots and highways' (Figure 2.24).

Other worthy, if often misguided, intentions were reflected in the proliferation of public health and planning standards throughout the second half of the twentieth century specifying road widths, density thresholds, land-use zoning, space between buildings and almost every aspect of public space. Ben-Joseph (2005) describes these as the 'hidden language of place making' arguing that today they still dictate much of the form and function of urban space around the world. In doing so, he argues, often the original purpose and value of such standards are forgotten, as the bureaucracies put in place to implement them increasingly do so in a manner that has little regard to their actual rationale, and even less to the knock-on effects of their existence. The results have been universally criticised for the bland, repetitive and sanitised public spaces that an over-emphasis on non-place specific standards can deliver (Figure 2.25).