

Chapter 3

Contemporary debates and public space

This chapter draws on different scholarly traditions including cultural geography, environmental psychology, urban design, and urban sociology to highlight the key tensions at the heart of the contemporary public space debate. In Chapter 1 it was argued that critiques of public space can often be placed into two camps, those who argue that public space is over-managed, and those who argue that it is under-managed. This, of course, greatly over-simplifies a complex discourse on public space that this chapter aims to further unpack. In fact there are a series of discrete but related critiques of the contemporary public space situation that the first part of this chapter identifies and organises. In so doing it also reveals a range of public space types that are used in the second part of the chapter to suggest a new typology of public space.

Critiques of contemporary urban public space

A range of recurring critiques characterise discussions of public space, ranging from the prosaic to the abstract. Most are based on a view about what public space should offer, often predicated on an idealised notion of public realm as an open and inclusive stage for social interaction, political action and cultural exchange. Although each of these qualities has distinct historical antecedents, as discussed in Chapter 2, it is also probably true to say that public space has rarely, if ever, achieved such a utopian state. Not least this is because the 'public' in public space is not a coherent unified group, but instead a fragmented society of different socio-economic (and, today, often cultural) groups, further divided by age and gender. Each part

of this fragmented society will inevitably relate to public space in different complex ways.

In that sense, today's critiques may be nothing new, although that should not diminish the critiques themselves as each have broad support in the literature, and the concerns they relate to are all too real. They begin with the notion that the public space, and therefore the public realm, is experiencing a physical decline.

Neglected space

Writing in the 1980s and commenting on the state of the urban environment, Francis Tibbalds' now classic polemic *Making People Friendly Towns* bemoaned the decline of public space across the world. Using the UK as an example of where a once rich public realm was declining, Tibbalds (2001: 1) argued that public space is too often:

littered, piled with rotting rubbish, covered in graffiti, polluted, congested and choked by traffic, full of mediocre and ugly poorly maintained buildings, unsafe, populated at night by homeless people living in cardboard boxes, doorways and subways and during the day by many of the same people begging in the streets.

Tibbalds quoted Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* when he said that the public realm is a 'SEP' (someone else's problem). Not only, he suggested, do the general public expect someone else to clean up after them, but so do the numerous organisations with a formal role in the creation and management of public space (Figure 3.1).

Like many urban designers, Tibbalds advocated the use of good design as a means to reverse the problems of a threatening and uncared for public