

Under the constant gaze of CCTV surveillance cameras, Boddy's (in Sorkin 1992: 123) claim that streets 'symbolise public life with all its human contact, conflict and tolerance' will be difficult to sustain.

Atkinson (2003: 1840), by contrast, in surveying British urban space policy, notes that although it is possible to see a 'revanchist'¹ strand at the extremes of public space policy in the UK as a coercive attempt to clear certain groups in order to protect the majority – zero-tolerance policing, ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders), child curfews and exclusions zones, etc. – at the same time other 'more compassionate ideas and initiatives can also be detected, including neighbourhood wardens, policing without the police', etc. Moreover, coercive policies may simply be viewed as attempts to empower communities by tackling the most severe problems in order to re-claim streets for the silent law-abiding majority. For him, the direction of travel is still not clear.

Homogenised space

The discussion above strongly suggests that urban public space shapes and is shaped by society; its fears, power relationships and priorities. Edward T. Hall (1966) recognised the significance of culture in increasingly diverse cities while others, notably Loukaitou-Sideris (1996) and Fainstein (2001), note how contemporary urban public spaces have become increasingly contested and fragmented as those within them compete for spatial identities. The argument goes that as communication between groups is often misunderstood and differences cannot be resolved, users are willing to accept a homogenised vision of urban public space that neither fosters civility nor community.

In addition, global economic changes have meant that urban public space is now recognised as a valuable commercial commodity, and global business in partnership with city governments has re-ordered the historic functions of public space through the production of new forms of public space that bring together those in society who can afford to consume. As cities increasingly compete for investment at a national and international level, they need to create environments that are seen as safe, attractive and which offer the range of amenities and facilities that their (increasingly white-collar) workers, and the tourists that they hope to attract, expect (Madanipour 2003: 224).

As has been argued, this new public space is linked to the move to late capitalism and mass consumption. This is significantly different from previous historic periods as described in the previous chapter, or the economic systems in place at the start of modernism, and can be generically described as globalisation. These forms of contemporary public

space use symbolism in design as described by Boyer (1994) as a wider part of postmodernism's referencing to history and culture. Symbolism, when combined with entertainment, can be viewed as populist, as described by Light and Smith (1998), or lacking the public sphere nature of public space as described by Sennett (1990).

Being an important global commodity, the owners and/or managers of urban public space ensure that visitors to public space perceive and interpret it as being safe. Therefore the multicultural and pluralistic nature of public space has meant that fear of the stranger is now dispelled by management and surveillance. The increasingly contested and fragmented nature of public space has increased this necessity, and, as Madanipour (2003: 217) notes, 'A combination of the need for safe investment returns and safe public environments has led to the demand for total management of space, hence undermining its public dimension'. Moreover, in order that visitors interpret public spaces as safe, strangers are increasingly being removed through the use of semiotic codes in space as described by Goldstein and Elliott (1994).

The combination of these traits produces Sorkin's (1992) departicularised urbanism or a form of homogenised public space. The trends, it is argued, are exacerbated by a further impact of globalisation, the speeding up of ideas and influences around the globe. Today designers, developers, and clients in both the public and private sectors are no longer tied to particular localities, but operate across regions, states, and increasingly on an international stage. The result is that design formulae are repeated from place to place with little thought to context. At the same time, in order to influence the design agenda locally, the public sector has increasingly adopted a range of standards, guidelines and control practices that in many cases merely parrot 'generic' 'globalised' design principles that may or may not be appropriate locally, or which are applied rigidly by de-skilled local government officers, again without thought to context. These pressures to standardise the design process have been extensively documented in the case of British residential (Carmona 2001b) and other (Bentley 1999) environments and produce both a homogenised public realm and associated architecture.

There has also increasingly been a reaction to the perceived 'compensation culture', as a result of which public authorities have been attempting to design out any risks in public space as a means to manage their liabilities in case of accidents and other dangers (Beck 1992). Although recent evidence in the UK suggests that the existence of an actual compensation culture is much overstated, the impact on the design and management activities of local government (and private developers) is not, and has often led to the creation of safe, but bland and uninspiring public space.