



3.19 Homogenised public space in China

It can restrict innovation, leading to more standardised designs and less interesting places ... It is [therefore] easier for those engaged in making decisions about schemes, especially clients, to justify a decision that avoids risk than a decision that uses risk creatively.

(CABE 2007: 1)

Arguably, therefore, homogenisation is the product of both contemporary design and development processes, and of the impact of all the concerns discussed above (Figure 3.19).

Towards a typology of public space

Decline or revival?

On the face of it, the critiques are damning of contemporary public space, but despite this, some authors argue that the reported decline in public space is much exaggerated (Brill 1989; Krieger 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998). Instead, they argue, public space was never as inclusive, democratic and valued as many commentators would have us believe. Jackson (in Fyfe 1998: 176), for example, concludes that:

In lamenting the privatisation of public space in the modern city, some observers have tended to romanticise its history, celebrating the openness and accessibility of streets. ... Various social groups – the elderly and the young, women and members of sexual and ethnic minorities – have, in different times and places, been excluded from public places or subject to political and moral censure.

Hajer and Reijndorp (2001: 15) argue that too much of the discussion about public space has been conducted in terms of decline and loss, something that in their opinion is both unsatisfactory and misplaced. For them, the pessimism of many commentators is founded on an artificial dichotomy that is established in many writings between the centre and

periphery, the latter, seen as replacing the former with impoverished forms of space. Instead, they suggest, 'if we regard city and periphery as a single urban field then we discover countless places that form the new domains that we are seeking'. However, 'The urban field is no longer the domain of a civic openness, as the traditional city was, but the territory of a middle-class culture, characterised by increasing mobility, mass consumption and mass recreation' (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001: 28).

The way in which 'the market' – the economy, globalisation, 'new-liberal hyper-capitalism' – threatens or even destroys the 'authenticity' of the historic meaning of local 'places' has often been a topic of discussion. These viewpoints have little consideration for the creation of scores of valuable new places. The possibility of these being created by 'the market' seems to be peremptorily dismissed. Privatization and commercialization are considered irreconcilable with the concept of public domain, but that discrepancy is less absolute than it might seem.

(Hajer and Reijndorp 2001: 41)

For them, the fact that something is private rather than public, suburban rather than urban, or civic rather than commercial does not determine either its quality as a place, or its potential role as part of the public realm. The consequence is that we should no longer associate public space solely with the streets and squares of the historic city core, but should instead embrace the new urban network of dissociated places. They conclude that now, as in the past, the quintessential character of public space is determined by those who occupy it, and society has long been fragmented into groups with a knock-on fragmentation of spatial types (Hajer and Reijndorp 2001: 85).

These observations are strongly supported by a body of research in the UK supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. In summarising this research, Worpole and Knox (2007: 4) argue that 'Contrary to conventional assumptions, public space in neighbourhoods, towns and cities is not in decline but is instead expanding'. So, whilst concerns are frequently expressed that open and uncontrolled public spaces have been increasingly privatised and made subject to controls and surveillance, the evidence for this is not widespread, and anyway results from a tendency for commentators to confine their notions of public space to traditional outdoor space in public ownership. Instead, it is important to reframe debates to reflect how people actually use spaces, and the fact that to members of the public, ownership and appearance do not define the value of space, rather the opportunities it provides for shared use and activity. If this broader notion of public space is accepted, they argue that despite the tendency towards privatisation, opportunities for association and exchange have increased. 'Gatherings at the school gate, activities