3.21 Reconquered cities: Portland

Classifying public space

If nothing else, this discussion confirms that the nature of contemporary public space is directly affected by the complex socio-economic context within which it is generated. Public space is a political arena, and in the most extreme cases has been actively fought over by groups with seemingly irreconcilable ideological visions concerning the nature and purpose of public space – a place of free access and interaction, unconstrained by the control of commercial and/or state forces, or, a space for particular defined purposes, subject to behavioural norms and control over those who are allowed to enter (Mitchell 1995: 115). But it is too simple to put the nature of public space down to these factors alone. In fact, public space as experienced today will be a result of:

- historical trends and norms that go back to the ancient world;
- the diverse modes of governance, regulation, legal dominion, and investment under which it is created;
- cultural traditions, that vary even across the Western world;
- political priorities and the particular lifestyles they support;
- the balance between political and market forces the increasing complexity of public space, and the limitations on professional skills and responsibilities to tackle this (see Chapter 1).

So, although much of the literature points to a homogenisation in the experience of public space, to its physical decline, and to trends in privatisation, commercialisation and exclusion, it is also true to say that much of the literature comes from a narrow academic perspective, and critiques certain types of public space, whilst not necessarily recognising the sheer diversity of space types that constitute contemporary cities, or the very different development models that often predominate around the world.

Reflecting the diversity, many attempts have been made to classify public space according to a range of characteristics, often inspired by the different academic traditions from where they derived:

1 From a sociological perspective – Wallin (1998: 109) defines much contemporary urban public space as 'dystemic space', a space of impersonal and abstract relationships, and as a deliberate antithesis to Hall's (1966) 'proxemic' spaces that are controlled by culture. Instead, the dystemic is 'a community of strangers' who inhabit public space. This is the world of the shopping mall, television, or worldwide web: the culture of capitalism where society is 'incessantly kept in a passive, voyeuristic, consumeristic state of mind and emotion'.

2 Focusing on the experience of space – Gulick (1998: 135–41) defines three types of public space that he claims many critics are confusing with each other:
- 'public property': the traditional definition where the government or state formally owns space;
- 'semiotic': made up of 'spatial identities' that encourage competition for, and segregation in, urban space (Fainstein 2001: 1);
- 'public sphere': the community space, where citizens can interact socially or politically.

3 In terms of power relationships – Kilian (1998: 115–16) argues that all spaces are expressions of power relationships containing both the public and the private. He identifies two urban public space types, public space as the sites of contact, and public space as the sites of representation (respectively Gulick's public sphere and semiotic public spaces), and argues that critics of both types of space are concerned with both public and private space. In fact, he suggests, all spaces are both public and private and contain restrictions, whether of access or activity, explicit or implicit.

4 As a journey from vision and reality – Lefebvre (1991: 39) distinguishes between 'representational space' (appropriated, lived space, or space in use) and 'representations of space' (planned, controlled and ordered). In this sense, space is seen as a chronology, developing and changing over time. Thus space typically begins as a representation of a particular type of space, with a particular range of uses, but is appropriated over time by other uses and activities.

5 By means of control – Van Melik et al. (2007: 25–8) argue that the design and management of public space has in recent years responded to two trends: 'On the one hand, a rising anxiety about crime induced people to avoid the public domain of the city and retreat into the private sphere. Yet, the appeal of urban entertainment also grew, inducing people to indulge in fantasy and new experiences outside the home'. For them, these represent two sides of a tendency towards greater control, but produce two distinct types of public space:
- secured public space – characterised by measures to create a sense of safety, through CCTV, enforcement activities, and exclusion of unwanted groups.