

2 THE CHALLENGE

The image opposite shows the abrupt halt that urbanism faces when it meets the disurban territory of the distributor road: in this case, in the form of a prosaic roundabout. What happens when the irresistible force of New Urbanism meets the immovable object of 'road hierarchy'? This is a question that lies at the heart of the challenge of this book.

On the one hand, we have plenty of ideas, guidance and consensus on what urbanistic grids of streets might look like. On the other hand, we have plenty of principles and conventions on how distributor roads should relate to each other in a road hierarchy. But the two do not necessarily match up.

The mismatch is currently exemplified in the way that the UK design guide *Places, Streets and Movement* – which is intended to address the design of streets in mixed use areas – is a companion to *Design Bulletin 32*, which is a guide to the design of *roads* in residential (i.e. mono use) areas.¹ Falling between the cracks, as it were, is a fair amount of urban design territory, not least the traditional main street, which is not comfortably addressed by either guide. And yet these guides perhaps represent one of the closest points that the two traditions approach each other – that most closely span between the extremes of streets as architectural ensembles and streets as trunk roads.

Accordingly, although there is increasing recognition of the significance of the street to urban design – by engineers as well as urban designers and planners – the streets often seems to somehow 'float free' of any clear or consistent conceptual framework. To fit engineering convention the street has to be conceptualised as an urban 'access road', that belongs in a 'road hierarchy', not a 'street grid'. In a sense, we have to suspend our belief in