part of the briefing process for other students trying to design a new school of architecture.

This technique has been used to distinguish the image of competitors in a marketplace. For example, we might ask people to compare several supermarket shops. Such data could be used to help define a niche in the market, enabling one company to make its shops different to the others. Alternatively they might show the aspects of the corporate design image may need attention, and so on. Of course not all people might view a place in the same way. It might be that a particular chain of shops is trying to attract a particular group of customers, perhaps teenagers for example, and therefore need to know how they judge spaces compared with other groups (Fig. 9.1).

I have also used this technique to make the crit session in design schools more focused. Here we asked the students of interior design to fill in a semantic differential about the kind of space they were trying to create, and they were asked to hand this in before actually doing their design work. Their drawings and models were then exhibited, and all the other students completed semantic differentials of the design as they saw it. The crit then focused on whether the intentions had been realized or not, and if not why. Not surprisingly, it sometimes proved rather difficult for students to accept that that their design was not seen by others as they had intended! However, such students could no longer dismiss this as purely the product of a vicious and cruel tutor with eccentric tastes and no understanding of their intentions.

Problems with the semantic differential

This tool is so simple to use and potentially so valuable that it has become very popular, and is now commonly used by people with insufficient psychological training to appreciate its limitations and dangers. Some of these might seem obvious, and yet can so easily be missed by the uncritical enthusiast. Some of the more frequent limitations are worth briefly recognizing here.

The tool is really only suitable if it can be assumed that a single response is being made by all respondents to all scales. If complex objects like whole buildings are being assessed, this becomes increasingly unlikely – one respondent may be more responsive to shape and form while another may be more focused on colour or materials, for example. The method of representation also creates dangers. Frequently studies rely not on actual places but on photographs as the stimulus. Other studies have clearly shown that the drawing or photograph is a surprisingly poor representation of space, and respondents may react quite differently to the photograph as opposed to the real space. A way of appreciating this is to look at photographs you have taken while on holiday. Frequently you notice people or objects in the photographs of which you were not aware at the time you took them. This effect may be considerably enhanced