Efficiency: Are Efficient Environments Efficient?

In urban design we seek efficient environments. How efficient should the layout of the public realm be? In terms of what? It is difficult to muster an argument for inefficiency on any dimension, but inefficiencies on one may result in benefits on another. In urban designing efficiency has often been seen in terms of ease of traffic movement, ease of access, ease of servicing and ease in phasing construction at a low cost. Such a view does not take into consideration the informal networks of communication that keep a functioning city or neighbourhood alive.

If one considers the range of design variables of concern in something like the way they are shown in Figure 1.6 then it is clear that any design is likely to be more efficient in meeting the demands on some dimensions than others. Streets designed for rapid high-volume traffic movement and with no kerb parking are inefficient and unpleasant for pedestrians. Efficient weather protection for pedestrians in Kyoto may not well display the aesthetic expression in the façades of buildings that it cuts across (see Figure 11.4). Much urban design involves a trade-off between effectiveness in meeting one design objective and another.

An efficient design today may not be so in the future. The design goal is thus to allow for change, to create urban designs that are robust, whose parts are easy to change. Short-term inefficiencies may prove to be long-run efficiencies. Elements of urban form, buildings in particular, should be able to be adapted or removed with relative ease. Row houses for instance, have proven to be easy to

Figure 11.4 Weather protection for pedestrians, Kyoto in 1992.