



# chapter two

the making of a good city



Exchange Square, Manchester

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD CITY

There are many factors which influence whether a city can be regarded as successful or not. These include economic, environmental and social factors. Infrastructure such as public transport provision and car parking is also important. But the real enjoyment of a good public city should always be measured from a pedestrian perspective. The perception of a pedestrian moving through a city is directly linked to the environment that they are experiencing. A good city should account for all the factors which influence this environment, to provide the pedestrian with an enjoyable and pleasurable experience which they will wish to repeat.

Some key factors which influence the design of the physical environment and affect the pedestrian experience include the following:

### Pedestrian accessibility

A good city should:

Allow the pedestrian to walk freely without overcrowding;

- Allow the pedestrian priority over vehicles, where feasible;
- Allow the pedestrian to move freely with limited interruptions;
- Minimise the waiting times at intersections and junctions;
- Provide good conditions for people with disabilities;
- Provide opportunities to rest and for social interaction; and
- Provide an integrated transport system, allowing the pedestrian access to the city centre.

### Safety

A good city should:

- Be safe to move around in during day and night;
- Provide a wide variety of uses/ entertainment during both day and night;
- Provide housing accommodation, encouraging activity and 24 hour surveillance;
- Provide functional and attractive lighting solutions; and
- Provide open, well-lit shop frontages.

### Legibility

A good city should:

- Connect important destinations and provide links to the city's assets;
- Provide clear wayfinding to allow the pedestrian to find their destinations;
- Take advantage to present good views/ landmarks; and
- Provide interesting facades/ window displays.



Example of social activity, Manchester

### Cleanliness

A good city should:

- Have a structured and rigorous management/ maintenance strategy for its public realm;
- Address issues of vandalism and fly posting;
- Have effective litter collection; and
- Enforce parking restrictions and regulate/ manage service vehicle movements.

### Quality/ range of spaces

A good city should provide:

- Spaces to shelter from weather;
- Spaces for cultural and social interaction;
- Spaces for cafes and outdoor events; and
- Provide a coherent sense of place and identity.

## LIFE IN PUBLIC SPACES

Cities are made up of essentially three types of spaces - **streets, squares** and **parks**. This is where the public life of a city expresses itself. This expression of life is not always extrovert, and indeed in many cases is subtle and personal, which is a reflection of human nature. In designing public spaces it is important to consider the possibility for many kinds of expression to occur as a result of the opportunity to participate in various activities.

Dr Jan Gehl, the Danish renowned public space expert, best describes life in public spaces as falling into three broad but distinct categories:

**Necessary activities** – activities that the user has to come into the city for, including work, school etc. These types of activity occur regardless of the quality of the physical environment because people are compelled to carry them out.

A good city will provide good conditions for these activities to occur in and provide a platform for them to continue over time.

**Optional activities** – activities which people visit the city for, including shopping, sight-seeing etc. These activities are what people are tempted to do when climate, surroundings and the place are inviting and attractive. These activities are especially sensitive to quality.

A good city will provide a range of optional activities within an attractive environment, encouraging people to spend time and to socialise in public space.

**Social activities** – activities that occur whenever people move about in the same spaces. This includes passive recreation where people simply wish to spend time outdoors enjoying themselves – eating, drinking, running, people-watching etc.

## A good public space will retain its own sense of place and identity.

A good city will offer a wide range of attractive social activities in order to attract this life. It is because of this life that a city becomes a lively, vibrant and desirable place in which to exist and thereby creating the attraction of the place as a destination.

In poor quality cities it is evident that only necessary activities occur, and there is no enticement made to enable people to dwell longer and consider various choices of activities. Good public cities will provide all the opportunities to partake in all activities, and even the necessary activities will be carried out in good conditions. In order to achieve this, consideration must be given to the types of user groups that may participate in different activities, for example, inhabitants of the city, visitors and tourists, various age groups from children to the elderly.



Social activity, Canary Wharf, London



Social activity, GLA, London

Spaces that accommodate or attract just one type of user all of the time usually become exclusive, a result that must be very carefully considered when considering true public space provision. Ultimately the aim within Belfast City Centre is to foster greater civic responsibility and civic pride in all the public environments and for the public to play a role in keeping them safe, clean and tidy.

The analysis undertaken to date in Belfast indicates that it predominantly operates on just the necessary activities, and currently other activities are limited or non-existent. However, Belfast has the potential to perform on all three levels, although this potential has not yet been realised. To achieve this, the City will need to continue its process of transformation, encouraging economic and social regeneration through new development opportunities and environmental enhancement.

## PUBLIC SPACE and PUBLIC REALM

### What does it mean?

**Public space** is defined as all the spaces between buildings that can be accessed by the public – these include all outdoor areas, roads, parks, squares, pedestrian areas, cycle routes and other open spaces. **Public realm** is the constituent parts that make up the public space. *By Design* (CABE; 2001) identifies good public space as ‘a place with attractive and successful outdoor areas’. Various individual components will contribute to a successful public space, and any development of a building and/or structure, has a responsibility to ensure that public space is a part of its consideration, as it is a key element that will shape the public environment.



City Markets, Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester



### What makes a good public space?

The success of a good public space relies heavily on the presence of people within the space. A public space of high quality will always be recognised by people interrupting their walk or daily lives so they can rest and experience the city and other people within the city centre.

The spaces should be designed for a range of user groups and activities and should consider the safety, protection and enjoyment of the people within the space. The user should feel safe from traffic, crime, anti-social behaviour and climatic conditions, whilst be able to experience the space in comfort and have options to sit, play, rest and walk at ease. The attractiveness of the space, good design, scale and visual appearance will heighten the enjoyment of using the space for the user.

A good public space will retain its own sense of place and identity.

### Management and Maintenance

The success of public space relies heavily on how it is managed and maintained. Long term management strategies, as well as high quality design, are therefore equally important elements in the continued provision of successful public realm. Once the rejuvenation of a public space is complete, it is important to realise that the physical management and maintenance of it is just beginning. In Belfast, the projected public realm investment of £75 million, in the City Centre and at Laganside, is likely to increase the maintenance costs currently met by City and Central Government. If the public realm is to be as successful as the budget warrants it to be, then it will be necessary to review the maintenance responsibilities and budgets in light of the detailed designs that are brought forward.

**'An unco-ordinated approach to the management and design of streets and other public spaces leads to inefficiency and poor quality' - cabé: Better Civic Buildings and Spaces**



Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester



Tate Modern, London



GLA, London



Pedestrianised Street, Copenhagen



GLA, London



City Park, Manchester



Amagertorv, Copenhagen



Pedestrianised Street, Copenhagen



Exchange Square, Manchester

The main purpose of rejuvenating Belfast's spaces, and creating new ones, is to ensure that greater numbers of people are attracted to use them. The management and maintenance needs to reflect this more intense use. Ultimately, the aim within Belfast City Centre is to instill a sense of civic pride in all the public environments and for the public to play a role in helping to keep them safe, clean and tidy.

Well-maintained public realm has the potential to bring significant economic regeneration and investment to the City, in the same way that has been experienced in Manchester.

## Observing other places and benchmarking... should be a continual process...

### PRECEDENT

Increasingly, cities are having to compete for potential 'customers', by attracting their attention and providing the necessary facilities and environments that will make them want to stay. The main competition is from other cities, especially in the European context, where people can cross borders easily to work and live in other places. Low cost airlines have also made weekend visits to international destinations ever more affordable and convenient. Belfast is no different in this respect, and it needs to be aware of what else is going on in terms of regeneration in other cities. Its main competition is from other European cities. The public realm investment gives the city a good opportunity to ensure that it is an attractive option in this marketplace.

In any large urban project it is important that scope and common goals of the exercise are identified at the outset. It is often the case when considering public space projects that a common understanding in what it constitutes is difficult to achieve, as the client and designer will undoubtedly approach it from different viewpoints. Therefore the practice of looking at what is happening in other cities can be a good one, as it can help both parties to identify what makes good public space design, and to learn from other cities in terms of how they have regenerated and utilised their public space.

Observing other places and benchmarking, by whatever means, should be a continual process and part of the accepted culture of improving the quality of urban environments in Belfast.



Square, Barcelona



Piccadilly Gardens, Manchester

