



Exhibition «The Reconquest of Europe. Urban Public Space, 1980-1999»  
18/03/1999 - 20/06/1999

## **In Favour of Public Space**

This exhibition seeks to defend an idea: public spaces constitute a nucleus of urban life. The quality of public spaces is a necessary factor so that society can enjoy high levels of sociability. Public space is everyone's space. The care which a city takes over its public spaces is a major indication of the human dimensions of that city. And, at the same time, the capacity of the inhabitants to protect public spaces by their presence is indicative of the level of civic awareness.

The history of the links between the city and public space in contemporary Europe is not at all linear. For some time now, the conflict has intensified between social pressure, in defence of public space, and pressure from speculators who want to convert everything with hard cash. Democratic pressure has meant that European municipal councils have had to abandon the planning fantasies of an age when anywhere seemed suitable to build a high-rise housing or office block. We live in a time when the ecological discourse has an impact on the sensibilities of the inhabitants, although the parties which focus on this ideology find it hard to make it a vote-winning issue. The authorities have had no alternative but to make pressure a virtue, and to reconcile themselves with a policy of public space which they soon found to be capable of bringing straight benefits.

It has been said that today it is difficult to differentiate between what is and what isn't public space: after all, there can be privately owned public spaces. Besides the ideological dogmatism of the time, it is true that there are private spaces which provide meeting places for inhabitants and seldom discriminate: department stores or discotheques, for instance. However, inside them, consumption plays a key role, whereas it should be a characteristic of the public space to function as a territory on the fringes of laws of efficiency and competitiveness: a democratic island where people can meet up and meet again without money setting any criterion of regulation or selection.

The street is the public space par excellence. The democratic city is the one in which the citizens dare to say "the street is ours," because they feel comfortable there, because they are well-looked after, because it is a place where everything is possible, from taking a walk to buying and selling. This is why the problem of public space can never be a problem of isolated strongholds. A public-space policy requires a global town-planning approach in which the place is as important as the paths which lead there. In the end, it is the quality of these paths which distinguishes between a city with a wealth of public space and a city which has only half a dozen islands which are carefully tended so that the writer can publish his golden prose in the architectural magazines.