



Figure 9.12 Bruges,
Drawing from Sitte

People live both public and private lives. Institutions, too, have a private face and public connections. These two personae – the public and private aspects of life – meet and are resolved in the façade of the building block. The friendly and responsive environment is one which maximizes choice of access through it from place to place, while privacy requires enclosure and controlled access. Maximizing choice of access has to be balanced against the privacy for individuals, groups and corporate bodies. The delicate balance between public and private space is maintained by the system of access adopted. In some cultures, where family privacy is of profound importance there may be a whole system of semi-public and semi-private spaces linking the inner private world of the family and the public world of the street and market place (Moughtin, 1985). The richness of the environment, in part, is a reflection of the way in which these mutually conflicting requirements of privacy and access are resolved.

‘Both physical and visual permeability depend on how the network of public spaces

divides the environment into blocks: areas of land entirely surrounded by public routes’ (Bentley *et al.*, 1985). A city with small street blocks gives to the pedestrian a great choice and variety of routes between any two points. The medieval European city is a fine example of such a form: to the stranger, the city may appear almost like a maze (Figure 9.12). Large street blocks, on the other hand, give less choice of routes and also produce an increased distance between paths. Smaller street blocks in cities increase the visibility of corners which announce the junction of paths and in consequence both the physical and visual permeability is increased. As a general principle the city street block should be as small as practicable. Where street blocks since the 1950s have been enlarged for development, consideration should be given to the restoration of the traditional street pattern and block size if the opportunity presents itself.

The need for both contact and privacy in daily life leads inevitably to a built form which acts as a filter between these two opposing requirements. Until the advent of modernist thinking in city planning, the traditional and sensible solution to this problem was a building form having a public face and a private rear. In Bath, designed by John Wood and his son (also John Wood), this principle of design is given eloquent testimony by the local people who describe the great civic spaces as having: ‘A Queen Anne Front and a Mary Ann Backside’. The design principle is quite simple: the front of the building should face onto the public street or square where all public activities including entrances occur, while the back of the building faces onto private space of an inner court screened from public view. When this principle is applied systematically to city development, the result is a system of insulae



9.13



9.14

or street blocks surrounded by buildings along their perimeters enclosing inner private courtyards. This type of development was anathema to Le Corbusier, Gropius and the avant-garde of the modern movements in architecture and planning. The case presented by designers like Le Corbusier is made difficult to refute when – as in Ireland in particular, with the notable exception of Westport – developments literally turned their backside onto the river, which was used as an open drain. All rivers, canals and waterways in the sustainable city should be lined by building frontages and be, in their own right, important landscape features of the city (Figures 9.13 and 9.14). For a more thorough analysis of Seafront, River and Canal see *Urban Design: Street and Square*, Chapter 6 (Moughtin, 2003).

We have seen that the size of the street block should be as small as the form and the function of the buildings on its perimeter permit. In Britain, the acre has a long tradition as a measure of land surface for costing purposes and as a recognized means of land sub-division. In the more rational systems of measurement adopted in continental Europe, the hectare serves the

same purpose as the acre in this country. It seems reasonable to suggest that most street block functions could be accommodated in insulae varying from 70×70 to 100×100 metres. There is a relationship between the size of the perimeter block surrounding the insulae and the private activities carried on in the private courtyard. Bentley *et al.* (1985) illustrate this relationship graphically for three main types of building use: non-residential use, flats, and houses with gardens (Figures 9.15–9.17).

Figure 9.13 Westport, County Mayo, Ireland

Figure 9.14 Westport, County Mayo, Ireland

Figure 9.15 Relationship of parking standards and street block (Bentley *et al.*, 1985)

