

Unveiling Place Perspectives with the Place Standard Tool

– Workshop Report –

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This report presents the outcomes of the workshop titled ‘Unveiling Place Perspectives with the Place Standard Tool’ held at the Fourth International Symposium on Platial Information Science (PLATIAL’23), which took place on 19–21 September 2023 in Dortmund, Germany. The workshop convened participants from diverse locations and disciplinary backgrounds during the symposium. Using the open-access participatory instrument known as the Place Standard Tool as a framework, the event provided a dynamic platform for engaging discussions and reflections. The tool offers a guideline around 14 major themes, which encompass our place experience. It has been widely adopted and implemented in a variety of contexts, and the workshop has built on its expertise to facilitate dialogue around a place that was selected as a workshop site. The participants conducted an exploratory walk and completed an evaluation of place, sharing their results in a final discussion. The workshop successfully unveiled diverse place perspectives, affirming efficacy of the Place Standard Tool as a versatile instrument for open conversations about place. The hands-on format, fostering informal exchanges, seamlessly aligned with the symposium’s broader objectives of nurturing platial discourse and expanding it towards new disciplines and fields.

Keywords: Place Standard Tool; street survey; interdisciplinary dialogue; participation; place evaluation; spatial planning

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1 Introduction

The discourse surrounding place is inherently complex and interdisciplinary, presenting both an asset and a challenge. Place, as a subject, holds significance in extensive theoretical discussions and practical applications, spanning across geography, planning, as well as social and urban studies. The advent of emerging fields, driven by advancements in geoinformatics and widespread digitization, contributes to new approaches and innovative perspectives to this dialogue (Purves et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2020). Even within such disciplines as cognitive science, or specialized domains like artificial intelligence and robotics, there are valuable insights into our perception, spatial orientation, and relationship with the environment. In the realm of practice, engagement with place takes various forms, including place-making initiatives, tactical urbanism, and grassroots activities. It serves as a powerful tool for community involvement, quality-of-life assessments, well-being evaluations, and the scrutiny of design projects and policy implementations from a participatory standpoint. This rich and heterogeneous landscape, while enabling inclusive and diverse discussion from various perspectives, simultaneously requires concerted efforts toward establishing common grounds for meaningful dialogues across different disciplines and approaches.

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The motivation behind the workshop ‘Unveiling Place Perspectives with the Place Standard Tool’ stemmed from the recognition of this intricate landscape, aiming to provide a platform for dialogue among the participants of the ‘PLATIAL’23: International Symposium on Platial Information Science’. Leveraging their shared interest in place and multifaceted expertise, the workshop aimed to facilitate a rich exchange of ideas, perspectives, and motivations by engaging with the adapted Place Standard Tool (PST). The tool offers a structured framework for holistic discussions about place, with a measurable view across diverse dimensions (Kleopa et al., 2022). Beyond being a profiling tool, it stimulates inclusive dialogues among stakeholders, facilitating the identification of community assets, challenges, and shared priorities (Gjorgjev et al., 2020; Horgan and Dimitrijević, 2019). This flexible tool, adapted for case studies in various contexts (see Cobs-Muñoz and Slivinskaya, 2023), engages communities through surveys, focus groups, walkabouts, and diverse settings (Kleopa et al., 2022). Originating from the Scottish Government, the PST consists of 14 themes, each assessing different aspects such as housing, green spaces, and public transport, among many others. It serves as a versatile instrument, promoting consistent assessments of new and existing places to ensure equitable access to high-quality environments (Place Standard partners, 2022). The tool prompts methodical discussions, considering physical and social elements, and identifies areas for improvement alongside existing assets (Gjorgjev et al., 2020; Horgan and Dimitrijević, 2019).

In the workshop, we explored the PST’s methodology and its applicability in different settings. In the following sections, we explore the workshop’s objectives and design, its implementation, the results and discussion, and a critical reflection and conclusions. The workshop was designed with three main sections: an introduction to the PST-adapted approach, an exploratory walk, and a results discussion, each contributing to a comprehensive exploration of place perspectives and the efficacy of the PST.

2 Workshop Objectives and Design

The workshop sought to reflect on the gap between theoretical discourse and practical approaches to place by fostering a dynamic conversation among participants from diverse backgrounds and disciplinary affiliations. In recognizing the significance of this interdisciplinary exercise, the hands-on format of our workshop became instrumental. Much of its success hinged on informal discussions and peer exchanges throughout its duration. As we delve into the workshop’s objectives and design, it is crucial to acknowledge the main guiding principle: the diversity of approaches and perspectives on place must be recognized, accepted, and embraced. This principle guided us in setting the workshop objective to establish common grounds enabling meaningful interdisciplinary exchange among participants. The emphasis was on engaging partakers actively, fostering a collaborative dialogue, and exploring diverse perspectives on place. These objectives align seamlessly with the broader discourse on place presented in the introductory section of this report. The interdisciplinary nature of the workshop’s objectives acknowledges the theoretical complexity of place, while the practical emphasis resonates with the applied aspects discussed in the theoretical discourse.

Given the above guiding principle and objectives, the workshop framework included an introduction to the PST, followed by an exploratory walk, a final results discussion, and the collective transfer of individual results into a common PST radar chart. Central to this design was the adaptation of the PST, a framework designed to structure conversations around place among stakeholders with varying knowledge and attitudes. The guidelines of Place Standard partners (2022) for a workshop state the following:

‘The Place Standard tool can help you to find out what people think and feel about their place and to identify the strengths of an area. [...] You might also want to arrange a walk-about of your place during your workshop [...].’

This statement resonates with the workshop’s and symposium’s objectives and design. This made possible the adoption of these open access guidelines, including a street survey sheet, for the purposes of the workshop and modifying it in a context-appropriate way for the place selected as a workshop case study. The selection of the case study had to conform to a number of requirements. First, since the notion of place presupposes a certain level of familiarity with the area in question, all participants had to have a chance to visit the place. Secondly, in order to foster a good conversation within a short time,

such place must have a strong character easily graspable by participants on a short visit. Dortmund Hauptbahnhof (in short: Dortmund Hbf, which is the major one of Dortmund's train stations), and its surroundings seemed to be a suitable site within walking distance to meet the above requirements. Aptly, it also fitted into the symposium theme 'Transforming places', as the station building has been undergoing a massive, long-lasting reconstruction at the time the workshop took place. The area of the site was not delineated by strict borders or paths on purpose (e.g., following the adjacent streets or landmark buildings), as the nature of place evades such limits. The participants were free to walk around the station as far as time and their sense of the area allowed. This setting naturally limited the place to a walkable-sized site around the station building and adjacent spaces, including interior passages and the building itself.


With Dortmund Hbf selected as our case study, providing a tangible and character-rich setting, our focus turned to a structured evaluation facilitated by the PST. This conversation-oriented tool became pivotal in our approach to understanding and reflecting on the quality of the chosen location. The PST includes 14 themes that address different elements of place. For each theme, there is a leading question and a series of prompts. The themes and their leading questions are as follows:

- (1) Moving around: How easy is it to move around and get to where I want to go?
- (2) Public transport: What is public transport like in my place?
- (3) Traffic and parking: How do traffic and parking affect how I move around my place?
- (4) Streets and spaces: What are the buildings, streets and public spaces like in my place?
- (5) Natural space: How easy is it for me to regularly enjoy natural space?
- (6) Play and recreation: How good are the spaces and opportunities for play and recreation in my place?
- (7) Facilities and services: How well do facilities and services in my place meet my needs?
- (8) Work and local economy: How active is the local economy in my place and are there good opportunities for work, volunteering and training?
- (9) Housing and community: How well do the homes in my place meet the needs of my community?
- (10) Social interaction: How good is the range of opportunities which allow me to meet and spend time with other people?
- (11) Identity and belonging: To what extent does my place have a positive identity that supports a strong sense of belonging?
- (12) Feeling safe: How safe does my place make me feel?
- (13) Care and maintenance: How well is my place looked after and cared for?
- (14) Influence and sense of control: When things happen in my place how well am I listened to and included in decision-making?

The same themes and the street survey sheet template provided by Place Standard partners (2023) were used (Figure 1), excluding their introductory section as it was approached in the first section of the execution of the workshop. The discussion section of the workshop was designed to share results and transfer individual evaluations to a common PST graph. The individual results lead to a conversation around the highest and lowest evaluation points and answering the question 'If you have a chance to change one thing about the site so that it becomes a better place, what would it be?'

3 Workshop Implementation

The workshop was open to all the participants of the symposium. It followed a paper presentation session where the work from Cobs-Muñoz and Slivinskaya (2023) was offered. The said presentation offered a glimpse of what can be expected from working with the PST with a similar adaptation but in different contexts. This, in particular, set an interest among participants working with participatory methods themselves who joined the workshop. In total, eleven people took part in the activity. Accordingly, the workshop was executed following the previously mentioned structure. It started with an introduction to the PST, explaining its conceptual underpinnings and providing practical instructions. Then, the participants were taken on an exploratory walk around Dortmund Hbf (Figure 2), the main site of the workshop, to conduct the PST evaluation with the help of the provided survey sheets. Subsequently, upon return to the venue, the participants shared their reflections on defining, understanding, and conceptualizing place from their disciplinary or practical viewpoints.



MOVING AROUND


How easy is it to move around and get to where I want to go?

Please rate the place on a scale from 1 to 7

☹️ 1 ☹️ 2 ☹️ 3 ☹️ 4 😊 5 😊 6 😊 7

What is good now?

How could we make it better in the future?



TRAFFIC AND PARKING


How do traffic and parking affect how I move around my place?

Please rate the place on a scale from 1 to 7

☹️ 1 ☹️ 2 ☹️ 3 ☹️ 4 😊 5 😊 6 😊 7

What is good now?

How could we make it better in the future?



PUBLIC TRANSPORT


What is public transport like in my place?

Please rate the place on a scale from 1 to 7

☹️ 1 ☹️ 2 ☹️ 3 ☹️ 4 😊 5 😊 6 😊 7

What is good now?

How could we make it better in the future?



STREETS AND SPACES

What are the buildings, streets and public spaces like in my place?

Please rate the place on a scale from 1 to 7

☹️ 1 ☹️ 2 ☹️ 3 ☹️ 4 😊 5 😊 6 😊 7

What is good now?

How could we make it better in the future?

Figure 1: Extract from the Place Standard Tool survey sheet used in the workshop. Example themes for 'moving around', 'public transport', 'traffic and parking', and 'streets and spaces'. Adapted from Place Standard partners (2023)



Figure 2: Exploratory walk towards Dortmund Hbf. Photo by Uwe Grützner, TU Dortmund University

The introduction guided the participants through the street survey form and discussed two key elements in order to establish a common ground for place conversation. First, we discussed the importance of place as a constituent of our daily life in the city. The main takeaway of the said process was that place serves as an umbrella term that encompasses the essential needs that structure urban life. These include not only practical functions, such as moving around or using public facilities, but also such high-order needs as identity, belonging, and sense of community, which are no less essential for our well-being. The second key element addressed general principles for assessing places. The notion of place as we used it for this workshop originates from a humanistic geographical school of thought (Cresswell, 2014; Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1979). As such, it is rooted in the human perspective. It recognizes the individual and subjective nature of our place experience. Accordingly, any attempt at evaluation of such experience will necessarily be of a subjective and individual nature for all participants. At the same time, the PST is aimed at looking into a collective inter-subjective assessment of place, which requires shared premises and criteria agreed by participants. The participants were invited to think of their place in an inclusive and future-oriented manner so as to project a prospective vision of a better place for all. Such perspective demanded an empathetic stance and encouraged the participants to reflect on the diversity and open nature of place in providing quality of life for all.

Following the introduction, the participants, guided by the workshop facilitator, set off to the site, Dortmund Hbf. The participants were encouraged to fill in the PST forms on the go and finalize them at the end of the walk at the plaza in front of the station. Observing the participants spreading around the area, it was noticeable how their tactics of exploring the place differed. Some stopped by and lingered frequently, while others walked briskly to cover the most distance and see the place from all sides. The planned 40 minutes on the site passed quickly, and the participants gathered around to pen down their impressions and notes on the forms. Some were focussed on filling in their forms, while others had already entered conversations about particular observations or content of certain themes. This heterogeneous behaviour gave the first hints of the success of the dynamics, as the participants easily engaged with the place in different ways but following the same framework. Back at the nearby symposium venue, the participants were asked to transfer their PST graphs onto an A0-format poster with a blank PST graph (radar chart) to visualize the resulting group evaluation of place. The discussion about place started while the participants were drawing and passing over text markers around the poster, justifying the reliance on hands-on tools for the workshop. Upon completion of the common PST graph, the wrapping-up discussion, led by the workshop facilitator, started. The participants were asked to comment on their highest and lowest evaluation points and give a brief answer to the question: 'If you have a chance to change one thing about the site so that it becomes a better place, what would it be?' The highlights and results of the discussion will be presented in the following section.

4 Results and Discussion

As anticipated, the discussion revealed the subjective and the shared, the individual and the collective in a resulting snapshot of impressions about place captured by the collective final PST radar chart (Figure 3). Shared opinions complemented by insightful and variegated individual observations all added up into a multilayered picture of place as seen by the workshop participants. Out of this rich polyphonic discussion and pictorial collective result, a number of reflections can be made on the nature of place as a complex notion and the nature of tools that we use to access and learn about places.

In the context of the collective PST radar chart (Figure 3), the average value registered at 4.0 out of 7.0. In an initial approach, three themes emerged with values around 5.0, leaning towards an overall positive appreciation of place: public transport (average: 5.1), facilities and services (average: 5.1), and streets and spaces (average: 5.0). These results underscore the transport-centric nature of the explored location and its robust connectivity. According to Place Standard partners (2023), commendable public transport is characterized by its affordability, reliability, and well-connectedness. This attribute not only diminishes reliance on cars but also promotes environmentally friendly and health-conscious modes of transportation. Similarly, the theme of streets and spaces contributes to crafting an appealing place where people relish spending time. Particularly in a locale like Dortmund Hbf, distinctive streets and spaces play a crucial role in aiding navigation. Likewise, easily accessible local facilities and services (as reflected in the positive assessment of the respective theme) contribute to fostering independent, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

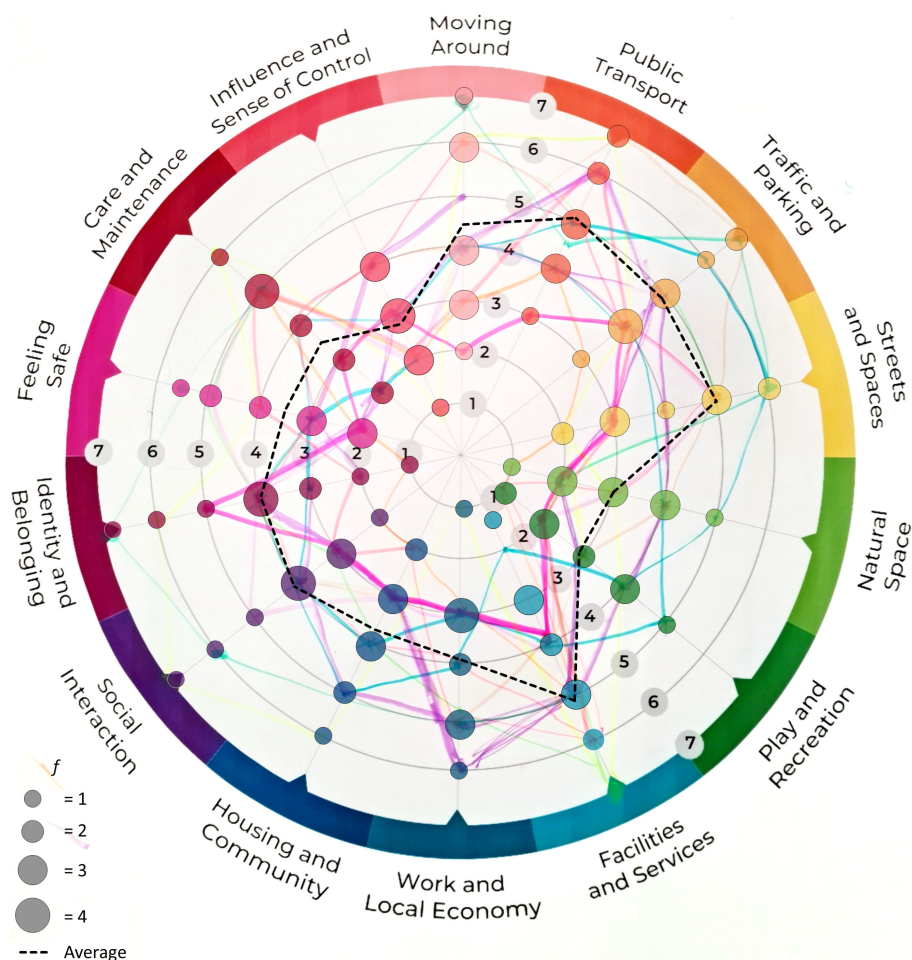


Figure 3: Final result depicted as a collective PST radar chart. The visualization is frequency-based.

Conversely, themes with average values of 3.0 or lower include natural space (average: 3.0), play and recreation (average: 2.8), and influence and sense of control (average: 2.8). As per Place Standard partners (2023), well-maintained natural spaces bring a multitude of benefits, encompassing improved health and well-being, support for wildlife, flood reduction, and enhanced air quality. However, in an environment dominated by concrete, such as Dortmund Hbf, the lower valuation of this theme aligns with expectations. Similarly, the low averages in the play and recreation theme highlight the potential for improvement in the quality of life and health and well-being of the community. Adequate spaces for play, catering to various age groups, are pivotal for personal development and the enjoyment of leisure, cultural, and sporting activities. The theme of influence and sense of control, averaging 2.8, indicate room for enhancing community engagement and empowerment. Effective decision-making involvement can contribute to building stronger communities and improving the overall quality of the place, fostering a sense of positivity among residents.

The most notable characteristic made apparent during the discussion lay in the difference between local participants, who were already familiar with the place and local context, and symposium guests from elsewhere. The notion of place includes the dimension of time to it (Beidler and Morrison, 2016), albeit not always explicitly. The PST provides a snapshot of place as per the moment of its assessment. It also projects a future vision of a better place based on such assessment, thus adding another time dimension. However, the very notion of place already contains a temporary dimension to it as per definition, as it presupposes such notions as attachment, sense of belonging, and meanings, all of which require time and duration to form (Low and Altman, 1992). In this way, it would seem apparent to expect that locals would know their place better and thus be more precise in their assessment. However, non-local participants, in fact, shared some insightful observations, which were drawn from their own experience. This revealed that our experience of places is accumulated and enriched throughout time

across locations, and we are able to see and read new places through the lenses of our former place knowledge. This also suggests that our knowledge of place does not account only for thick descriptions of locales but contains underlying invariant structures of place experience that manifest across our encounters with familiar and new places.

A key observation that emerged throughout the wrapping-up discussion concerned the subjective nature of our place experience and the similarly subjective nature of any assessments. Such subjectivity appears not only in regard to more complex notions, which necessarily involve affective components (e.g., sense of community or feeling safe) but also in regard to seemingly neutral themes such as public transport or traffic. Whereas the participants shared some factual observations (e.g., availability of parking), their assessment differed, as illustrated by the spiking differences in the resulting common PST graph. This proved that public spaces that can be functional from one point of view could be assessed by others as rather dysfunctional based on individual needs, attitudes, preferences, and other subjective factors. At the same time, as again illustrated by the common PST graph, some patterns evidencing collective impressions also emerged, allowing for a broader picture of the place beyond individual views. In fact, upon sharing their results and commenting on the lowest and the highest points, many participants received supporting voices expressing agreement or solidarity. Contrasting impressions did not spark argumentative debates as to whose vision of place is more valid or correct. Instead, the unlike comments were appreciated by the group as they revealed more facets of place from varied perspectives. This reasserted the value of place as a multifaceted and open notion emerging out of personal experience, as well as social interactions.

The workshop discussions also highlighted the open-ended framework character of the PST as a tool. Fourteen themes covering a broad range of place-related topics are open for interpretation from those who use the tool or analyse its results, as there is no fixed content to any of them. The themes and subdivided categories outline the most general topics, and those often overlap (e.g., 'moving around', 'public transport', and 'traffic and parking' categories are rather difficult to compartmentalize in a precise way). In this manner, the PST has to accommodate possible variations and diverse interpretations without compromising overall coherence and needed shared understanding. The answers given by the participants illustrated this feature of the PST very well. For some, influence and sense of control had to do with the lack of public participation in the current redesign of the station, while for others, it was severely compromised by regular delays of trains in a way that station users have no control over how much time they have to spend while taking trains there. Such different readings, however, did not obstruct the dialogue but were taken as an added value to it, attesting to the relevance of the PST if employed as designed, recognizing its character.

5 Critical Reflection and Conclusions

The workshop encountered challenges due to the tight two-and-a-half-hour schedule within the comprehensive symposium programme. This required a focussed and curated approach, with hands-on support to quickly familiarize participants with the Place Standard Tool (PST). Another constraint was the deliberate omission of detailed socio-economic, historical, and current contextual information about the workshop area. This decision aimed to prioritize a rich exchange of perspectives over exhaustive site understanding, focussing on acquainting participants with the PST's conceptual framework and practical application through a specific real-life example. Despite these challenges, the workshop was successfully executed within the time frame. This curated approach, coupled with hands-on support, efficiently familiarized participants with the tool.


The strategic emphasis on learning about the PST's conceptual framework and practical application served the workshop's goal of gathering diverse impressions for reflective analysis. The speculative nature of the workshop's discussions, grounded in hypothetical premises, did not compromise the validity of the results. Instead, it aligned with the workshop's objective, contributing to the success of unveiling diverse place perspectives. The lively discussions reaffirmed the PST's efficacy as a versatile instrument, providing a structured framework for open conversations about place. The hands-on format, encouraging informal exchanges, seamlessly aligned with the symposium's broader objectives of nurturing platial discourse. Positive participants' feedback indicated contentment and interest in integrating the PST into future research, showcasing the workshop's success in fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and advancing our understanding of the intricate fabric of place.

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