Re-imagining the Public Realm

A Walk in the Park with the Place Standard Tool

Introduction

Glasgow Allotments Forum (GAF) in partnership with Public Health Scotland (PHS) invited a group of twelve people to go for a walk in Victoria Park with the Place Standard Tool (PST). Their role would be to consider whether or not the Park could be a site for food growing. GAF wanted to find out whether the PST, which is being backed by the Scottish Government as the means for engaging local people in decisions about planning, would enable our participants to discuss the role of food growing activities in this type of urban environment.

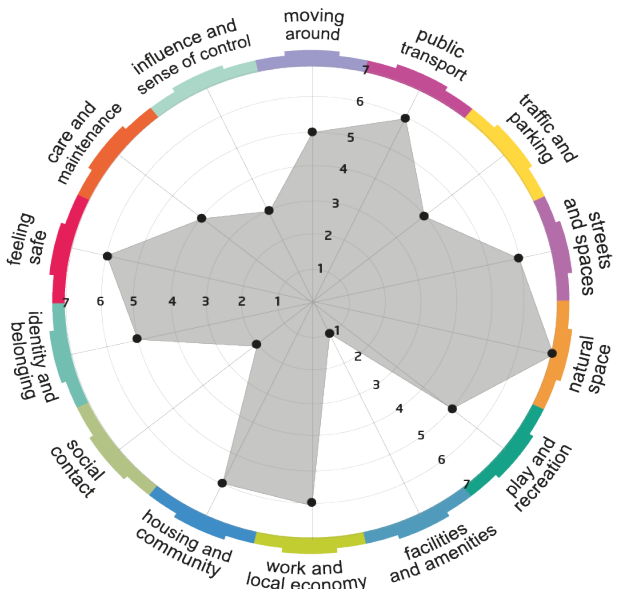
This was important to GAF because:

a) We firmly believe that food growing is of increasing relevance and value in the City given climate change, significant challenges to health and well-being and problems of social inclusion and justice.
b) Growing food communally offers benefits for physical and mental health, social inclusion and community development, education and food culture.
c) We know that demand in Glasgow vastly outstrips supply when it comes to allotments and other forms of communal growing particularly after the experience of the COVID pandemic.

For all these reasons the consideration of food growing needs to be an important element in local place planning.

The Place Standard Tool

This consists of a booklet containing a page each for scoring a place on the basis of 14 themes that form the circular framework for a spider diagram.



The place that the members of the group are assessing is given a score on a scale of 1 (poor) to 7 (good) for each of the 14 themes by each participant. By encouraging people to undertake a baseline assessment of a place based on a shared set of criteria the tool "allows people to work together productively and consistently" in deciding how a place may be developed for the future.

The Group
People were invited on one of two counts, either that they were involved in organisations whose activities focused on food growing and/or that they were from local organisations that had a stake in the Park. Three other people were involved, two as facilitators - one from PHS whom had extensive experience of using the Standard and one from GAF who specialised in evaluation – the third person was recording the whole process.

Preparation
All the participants were sent a paper copy of the PST workbook along with an e-mail outlining the purpose of the simulation over a week before the event. A zoom meeting was held three days before the visit to let people meet online, and for the organisers to field any questions the participants had and clarify the logistics of the day.

The Tour of the Park
The tour is a critical stage in the PST process. We met up at the main gate. Everyone was given a map of Victoria Park and a copy of the PST workbook (if they had not brought one) in which to record their observations. Three groups were formed each of which had somebody in it who was very familiar with the Park. All three groups set off in slightly different directions.



The Workshop
We re-assembled at the Annexe in Partick for lunch an hour and a half later. At the end of lunch three foursomes with a different membership from the groups that had toured the Park were formed for the two workshop sessions.

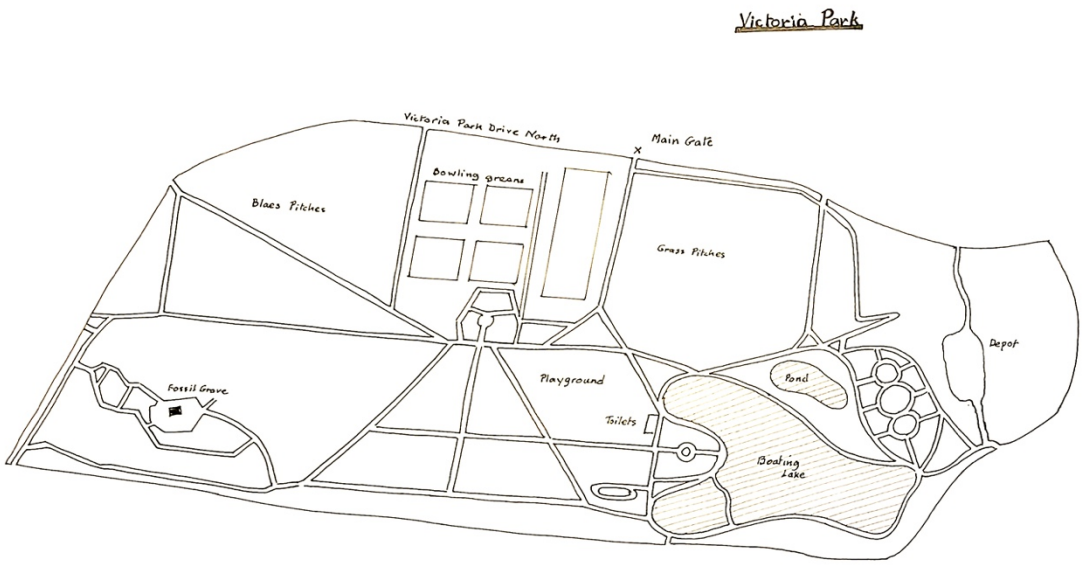
Session 1
During this session the groups followed the normal PST process of discussing each of the fourteen themes that form the assessment framework (Spider Diagram) in turn and scoring the Park in relation to each theme from 1 (bad) to 7 (good).



Each group reported back to everyone else using their notes. Both the group task and the plenary led to lively discussions with variations in intensity across the individual themes. Generally, the divisions between the themes were preserved in these discussions. Food growing, as such, was not mentioned.

Session 2

After a break, the groups were asked to consider how helpful the PST had been in enabling them to discuss food growing focusing on the map of the Park that they had been given. Again, there was a plenary after the group discussion which was conducted on an individual and oral basis. During this session the group moved toward a surprisingly radical reframing of what food growing in the Park could be and of the values that they felt should underpin the activity.



Commentary on Outcomes

When we asked them if they found the PST useful participants noted that the thematic approach had not enabled them to start a discussion about food growing. The PST themes where growing might possibly have figured:

- Play and recreation (*where planners often locate growing as a leisure activity*)
- Facilities and amenities
- Natural space
- Work and local economy (*horticultural social enterprise*)

did not trigger a consideration of food growing even though it was something group members were all interested in and were all asked to comment upon.

However, they felt the PST was very helpful in making them consider the context in which a growing space might fit in a far more holistic fashion than they would otherwise have done. The PST and the tour it required as part of the process of its use helped them to start to consider food growing as part of public activity in a public space and to make a strong link between growing and issues of social interchange, identity and agency.

In the Session 2 plenary the group moved toward a strategic conception of food growing where different approaches: allotments, community gardens and urban agriculture could become interactive activities deliberately pursued both ***in public*** and ***with the public***. As such food growing could contribute to the quality of the place, improve the environment, encourage the development of a vibrant local food culture and the contribute to the well-being of local people. It could even be seen as the display of a new aesthetic within the Park.

The post-its left at the end of the day indicated participants' appreciation of:

- The open sharing of knowledge and the realisation and exploration of differences through discussion.
- The realisation of how important public spaces are to making meaning in people's lives which was something they had not fully appreciated before.
- The power to rethink and reimagine public spaces.
- The PST as a methodology for wider reflection on what public spaces mean.

Questions and Recommendations

1 There should be more guidance about the preparation and facilitation of groups before using the Place Standard Tool. The process in which the PST is used is critical to achieving its full value and opportunities for discussion are central to that end.

2 Is the scoring of a place against the themes valuable/meaningful or does it distract from paying attention to the qualitative content of what might be said?

3 The themes as they stand are too restrictive when it comes to considering the use of the non-built environment. The theme of *Natural Space* needs to specifically provide for a fuller consideration of the options for the development of 'green' areas whether cultivated, derelict or wild. Food growing needs to figure as an important element of this theme.

4 If the Place Standard Tool is used in its current form facilitators need to discuss the topic of food growing and reach an agreement with their group members about where observations relating to food growing can best be included in the Place Standard Tool prior to visiting the site to ensure this important activity is properly considered.

5 The themes of the Place Standard Tool divide the assessment of a place under consideration into fourteen 'segments' each with a 'score'. How is this analytic approach to be balanced by the creative process of putting a place back together again and enabling participants to think about the development of a place as a unified whole?

A new approach to the development of green space is urgently required that puts a proper value on land for food growing in urban settings.

The reimagination of the Public Realm can and should be encouraged in our current context of rapid climate change. The Place Standard Tool needs to be embedded in a process that ensures it facilitates creativity by encouraging a synthesis of values, ideas and meanings on the part of those who use it.

Conclusion

This 'Walk in the Park ' has opened up a number of issues for discussion concerning:

- The inclusion of land for growing in local place planning processes;
- The way in which the Place Standard Tool is used.
- The place of allotments and other forms of communal food growing within the public realm.

In looking to next steps for this project we would like to invite you, the reader, to feed back your own experiences, opinions and questions about these., or any other issues you feel this report raises.

Contact GAFForum@gmail.com