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From Observation to Participation: How **Listening** Reshaped My Approach to Public Space Design

A reflective journey through participatory placemaking

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From Observation to Participation: How Listening Reshaped My Approach to Public Space Design

This reflective contribution explores how the Inclusive Cities Workshop, “Shaping Inclusive Cities: Dialogues on Participation and Placemaking,” in Weimar reshaped my approach to public space design. Using Sophienstiftsplatz as a case study, it examines how conversations with local residents and collaborative activities revealed perspectives that physical site analysis alone could not capture. These insights informed targeted interventions to better support an inclusive public space. Working in an international, interdisciplinary group also encouraged me to reflect on how participatory approaches might be adapted to my own urban context in Alexandria, Egypt. Overall, the experience highlights the importance of placing people’s everyday realities at the heart of the design process.



Figure 1: Learning from Local Voice. Credits: Zeina Koteit.

A place can be observed, mapped, and analyzed; but can it truly be understood without listening to the people who experience it?

As a master's student with an interest in social inclusion and human-centered urban design, I joined the Inclusive Cities Workshop “Shaping Inclusive Cities: Dialogues on Participation and Placemaking” in Weimar eager to explore these ideas beyond the context of my own city, Alexandria. I expected to deepen my understanding of public spaces through new analytical methods and international collaboration. Beyond that, the workshop¹ also showed me that meaningful public spaces emerge from a deep understanding of the lived experiences of the communities they serve. This article reflects on that learning journey through participatory placemaking.

Standing in Sophienstiftsplatz (our case study), our team had already spent time observing movement patterns and documenting the physical qualities of the space. Yet it was only after speaking with people who regularly engaged with the space that my perspective began to shift. We interviewed four people of different ages, with different interests and different reasons for engaging with the space. One interviewee described it simply: *“The street is a nightmare! But the space is better than before.”* In that moment, I realized that understanding a space required listening to the people who experience it.²

¹ The Inclusive Cities Workshop “Shaping Inclusive Cities: Dialogues on Participation and Placemaking” led by Dr. Ammalia Podlaszewska Chairperson of Culture Goes Europe (CGE)

² **Placemaking** refers to a participatory process of imagining and creating places with communities to transform public spaces into inclusive environments that strengthen local identity and everyday experience. Little S. (2020). *Engaging Youth in Placemaking: Modified Behavior Mapping*. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 17(18), 6527. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186527>

Beyond Designing Spaces: Why Participation Matters

Spatial evaluation explains how a space is designed, but it cannot fully explain how it is experienced. While it remains an essential foundation of urban design, the workshop introduced participatory placemaking as an approach that complements it by involving communities in understanding and shaping public spaces.

Participatory placemaking recognizes residents as active contributors whose everyday experiences reveal qualities of space that may remain invisible through physical analysis alone, rather than treating them as the final recipients of design decisions, which makes participation an essential part of understanding how public spaces function in everyday life. This perspective became the guiding principle of the workshop and the foundation for every activity that followed, encouraging us to move beyond designing for communities toward designing *with* them.

The Process: Learning Through the City

The workshop transformed the city into a learning environment where each activity gradually deepened our understanding of inclusive public spaces. We were encouraged to observe, question, and experience spaces before considering how they might be improved (Figure 2).

Through a practical placemaking toolkit³, which combines guided city explorations, observation, collaborative mapping and interviews, we moved beyond documenting physical characteristics to understanding how people experienced public spaces.

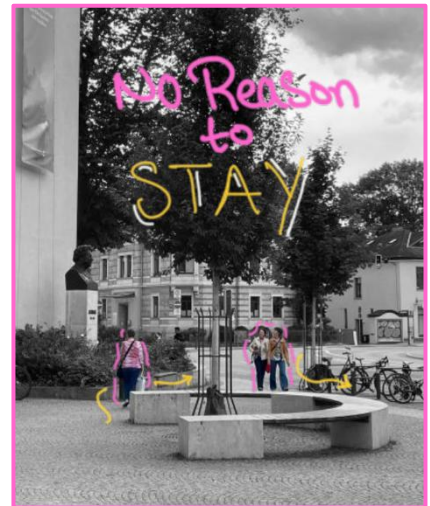


Figure 2: Exploring Weimar through observation. Credits: Zeina Koteit.

We spoke with two security staff members and two orchestra members from the German National Theatre, located directly in front of Sophienstiftsplatz. The orchestra members told us

³ **The participatory placemaking toolkit** is a collection of methods that are based on EU project Placemaking4Inclusion, designed to examine how people experience public spaces and to inform collaborative and inclusive urban interventions.

Urban Foxes. (2023). *Placemaking for Inclusion (PM4I) cookbook*. Placemaking for Inclusion (PM4I) Project Consortium. <https://placemaking.4learning.eu/>

they did not use the square for sitting, but mainly parked their bikes and briefly chatted there after rehearsals. They also felt that, despite being directly in front of the theatre, the space was not really part of it. These insights were then synthesized through practical placemaking tools, helping us connect community experiences with spatial analysis before proposing interventions. Looking back, I realized that every activity shared the same purpose. That is transforming observation into understanding, allowing design decisions to emerge from evidence rather than assumptions.

From Understanding to Intervention



Figure 3: Co-creating a shared understanding of space. Credits: Zeina Koteit.

By the time our team began generating design ideas for Sophienstiftsplatz, we were no longer designing from first impressions. Through participatory placemaking tools, we developed a shared understanding of the site's strengths, challenges, and residents' needs (Figure 3). Instead of asking, *"What should this place become?"* we found ourselves asking, *"What does this place need to better support the people who use it?"*

Our analysis revealed that although Sophienstiftsplatz occupies a central location, it functions primarily as a transit space. Safety concerns and limited opportunities to stay (particularly for children and young people) reduced its potential as an inclusive public space. Using the Public Space Diagnosis Poster (Figure 4), Placemaking Canvas, and user personas, we translated these insights into targeted interventions that aimed to improve safety and social interaction rather than proposing large-scale physical changes. What worked particularly well was the participatory process itself. Combining direct observation with conversations



Figure 4: Public Space Diagnosis Poster. Credits: Workshop output developed collaboratively by Group 2.

with local residents allowed us to validate our initial impressions and develop design priorities grounded in lived experiences.

Our proposals emerged from evidence gathered collaboratively throughout the workshop, rather than relying solely on physical site analysis. One limitation was the limited time available for site investigation. Our observations captured only a snapshot of how Sophienstiftsplatz functioned, whereas experiencing the space at different times of the day could have revealed changing patterns of use and activity, providing a more comprehensive basis for our design decisions.

Reflecting on the process, I realized that the most valuable outcome was not the proposal itself but the participatory journey that shaped it. The workshop demonstrated that meaningful design solutions emerge when observation and participation form the foundation of decision-making.

Refining My Approach to Public Space Design

Before this workshop, I often understood the architect's role as analyzing a site, identifying problems, and proposing appropriate design solutions. While I still believe these are fundamental aspects of design practice, the workshop expanded my understanding of where good design begins. I came to realize that architects are not only designers of spaces but also listeners and collaborators who must understand the people behind the space they seek to improve.

Working in mixed groups from different universities was particularly fascinating: despite our different backgrounds and perspectives, we consistently found common ground and shared goals. Experiencing public spaces in Weimar also made me reconsider how I approach change in Alexandria: where large-scale transformation can be challenging: perhaps small, community-informed interventions can still create meaningful change. While the specific needs and design responses may differ between Germany and Egypt, I believe the participatory process itself can be adapted across contexts.

What I will carry forward from this experience is not a specific design method, but a different mindset. My approach now extends beyond design guidelines to include engaging with communities and allowing lived experiences to inform design decisions. Ultimately, participation

is the foundation that enables design decisions to become more inclusive and responsive to the people they are intended to serve.

The Inclusive Cities Workshop taught me that designing inclusive public spaces begins long before the first sketch; it begins by *listening*.

Acknowledgments

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References

Little S. (2020). Engaging Youth in Placemaking: Modified Behavior Mapping. International journal of environmental research and public health, 17(18), 6527. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17186527>

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