

# Emplotment

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## 1. Definition

Emplotment is the act of situating events, characters, and places into a plot, a sequence of events in space and time.<sup>16</sup> In the context of planning, emplotment plays on the double meaning of the word plot, which denotes both a spatial location and the development of a story.

## 2. Example

In the New York comprehensive waterfront plan *Vision 2020*, the opening pages of this 180-odd page document introduce the planning area and the plans, and in doing so, situate place and plan within a distinctive plot that emphasizes the redressing of past wrongs and a renewed balance between a variety of interests. The introductory chapter of *Vision 2020* sets the tone:

After decades of turning our backs on the shoreline—allowing it to devolve into a no-man's land of rotting piers, parking lots, and abandoned industrial sites—New York made reclamation of the waterfront a priority.<sup>17</sup>

With these words, the planning area is situated not only geographically, but also as part of a distinct narrative plot, in which the New York shoreline has fallen from grace but will be reclaimed and restored, previous wrongs will be righted, and imbalances adjusted. Several elements that support this mode of emplotment are outlined in the Introduction of the plan, as well as in its two prefaces. The

shoreline is described repeatedly as one of the “most important resources” and “assets” of New York; its inclusion and restoration is enacted also by the coining of new metaphors, such as the idea of the “Blue Network”, a concept introduced in the plan to denote the waterways of New York. The outcome will be beneficial in many ways, as is asserted throughout the text: “Reconnecting with the water will provide social, economic, and environmental advantages.”<sup>18</sup> Emplotment means situating this development area, the plan, and the argumentation for particular decisions, within a broader narrative of historical neglect and reclamation of what is lost; of resolution and redemption. The resulting effect is a causal and rational drive for the decisions laid out in the plan (see fig. 3).

*Fig. 3: The New York waterfront at Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with Domino's Factory redevelopment. Image by Lieven Ameel. October 2019*



### 3. Explanation

In appearance and purpose, planning and policy documents are obviously very different from single-author novels. But all planning narratives exhibit some thematic, linguistic and stylistic features that situate the planning area on a geographical map *and* within a narrative pattern. Emplotment is the narrative strategy that situates a specific event or events within a larger narrative framework, giving sense, structure, coherence and causality to what otherwise would remain a mere enumeration of actions.

The use of emplotment as a narrative concept outside the field of literary studies is associated with the work of Hayden White and his examination of historiographical texts in terms of their narrative. White used “emplotment” to denote the processes by which events are contextualized into meaning-making totalities, receiving “the formal coherency that only stories can possess”.<sup>19</sup> He distinguishes four modes of emplotment: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. The difference between these different modes is in world-view and in how these narratives find their completion. Romance – the kind of story associated with knights on a quest – tends to revolve around a hero’s accomplishments and the overcoming of obstacles; “a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness ...”<sup>20</sup> Satire has an opposing worldview, in which the main character is unable to overcome the obstacles created by the world or society; it questions notions of societal unity and the possibility of happy resolution. The difference between tragedy and comedy is not so much in their worldview, but primarily in their ending: In its resolution, comedy resolves tensions and ends with reconciliations – the happy ending of marriage or new beginnings. Tragedy ends with disaster (most, though not all, Greek tragedies are a case in point), but the worldview in tragedy does not have to be hopeless, since the readers or onlookers of tragedy may have gained some new knowledge about the world, and about their place within it. Emplotment is one of the ways in which narratives interact with readers’ expectations, since it is designed to activate and structure readers’ preconceived knowledge and their horizon of expectation, and to

draw on the kind of dominant scripts and frames of knowledge that narratively structure experience.

In planning theory, Hayden White's examination of narrative tropes within historiography has been applied in re-examining planning histories.<sup>21</sup> Its usefulness for an analysis of urban planning has been illustrated by Mareile Walter's examination of narratives of Swedish Karlskrona.<sup>22</sup> Walter draws on White's theory of emplotment to show that Karlskrona's *Översiktsplan 2030* is structured as a "comedy of the sustainable city". In the example from the planning of the New York waterfront that introduced this entry, the emplotment follows the romantic and the comic mode, in which the planners and the city are seen as heroes who overcome monumental difficulties to reach their goal and to triumph over past wrongs (romantic mode), and providing a happy ending in which seemingly contradictory interests become balanced and resolved (comic mode).

As has become apparent, plot endings are defining elements in emplotment, since they provide a measure of closure and are thus central for attributing meaning and value to what is recounted. Beginnings are equally important, setting the stage for how an area will be presented in narrative terms. In planning texts, the opening paragraphs and the conclusions are the most obvious places to find narrative elements that emplot the development area as well as the plan itself.

## 4. Applications

Drawing on emplotment in the context of planning means to be particularly aware of how beginnings and endings set the tone not only for the spatial contextualization of a development area, but also for the kinds of narrative scripts, frames, and expectations that are activated within the reader. Beginnings of a planning text can deliberately set the stage for a narrative of recovery by starting out with a historical description of neglect, as happens in the example from the New York waterfront. Drawing on particular metaphors from the area's cultural history can lend further rhetorical power to such modes of emplotment. But it is important to be aware that

powerful beginnings and the particular modes of emplotment can raise unrealistic expectations or lead to path-dependency that at worst could limit flexibility for future plans.

**Related entries:** Closure, Genre, Path-dependency, Scripts

## Further Reading

Ameel, Lieven. "Emplotting Urban Regeneration: Narrative Strategies in the Case of Kalasatama, Helsinki." *Re-City. Future City – Combining Disciplines*. Ed. Juho Rajaniemi. DATUTOP 34 (2016): 223–241.

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