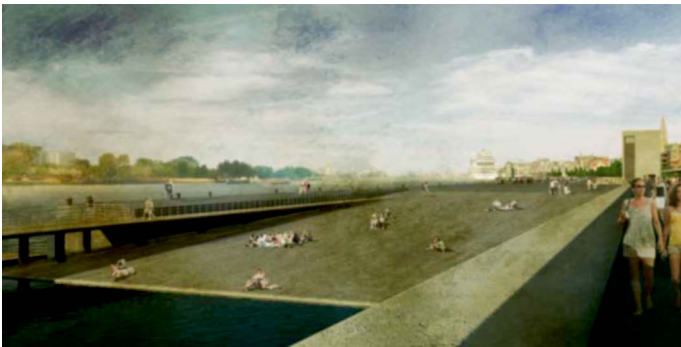# Closure

1. Definition

Closure is the resolution, in the ending of a story, of the conflicts and tensions described. When a story has closure, a perceived imbalance is restored; a difficulty is finally overcome; good or evil get their rewards. Closure is what gives a meaning and a purpose to all that has preceded it; it gives a story a sense of completeness, and as such, it is closely bound up with why readers or listeners are compelled and moved – also affectively – by stories. Closure ensures that the expectations of the reader, raised in the course of the narration, are satisfied. While closure is the expected norm in literature and everyday storytelling, there are any number of stories that deny the reader or listener a satisfying ending. In the context of planning, closure relates not only to the ending of a planning narrative, but also to how a proposed plan can provide a sense of closure after urban degeneration or periods of tensions between competing interests in a city.

2. Example

The twenty-first century plans for the redevelopment of the Antwerp Quays (2010) are constructed around providing closure to a story in which the conflicting interests had for too long been unresolved, to the dissatisfaction of the public. The Quays, located near the city centre along the right bank of the Scheldt, 6,8km long and roughly 100m in width, had been left neglected for decades, separating the city from the water. Potentially prime real estate was used for

parking – the "most beautiful car parking space in Europe".[12] In the master plan for the Scheldt Quays, the redeveloping of the Quays balances the legacy of the post-industrial waterfront with the demands of rising water levels to restore the connection between the river and the city. Not only the quays, but also the city is described as achieving a degree of completeness as the result of the plan. The example is typical of a plan visualizing the moment of closure when an imbalance is restored or a conflict resolved. An interesting twist – found in a range of similar post-industrial waterfront developments – is that the narrative closure tends to coincide with an opening up of the urban public space to a public that had only limited access to these sites, from the industrial era onward. Narrative closure tends to presuppose that the end-state has been preordained, or is somehow natural or inevitable, which is one of the reasons why closure can lend a powerful rhetoric to policy narratives. The plans for the Antwerp Quays (see fig. 2) emphasize that the plans return to the citizens and the city what is rightfully theirs, enabling the city to fulfil part of its natural destiny as a city defined by the river.[13]

Fig. 2: Visualisation of the Zuidersluis, Antwerp Quays. Source: © PROAP and City of Antwerp, 2011

3. Explanation

Closure is the ending that gives meaning to all that has come before. In classical tragedy and comedy, the final scene is what decides whether a play will be a tragedy (ending tragically) or a comedy (ending well). A meaningful ending is not only the expected norm – although not necessarily upheld – of many literary texts, but of all forms of narrative: closure is akin to the closing statements in everyday conversations, a way to wrap up what has been told, but also to summarise its meaning and relevance.[14] In classical rhetorics, closure is what enables an artwork to be complete and wholesome, and hence both convincing and aesthetically pleasing. In everyday storytelling and also in literary texts, closure is associated with the final utterings of narration. Planning texts in many ways operate quite differently – nobody expects people to read planning documents from end to end – and it is more productive to think of the plan itself as providing closure to a storyline that is set out in the course of planning documents.

In postmodern theory, closure has generally become suspect. Closure was deemed to be aligned with the ideologically flawed "great narratives" and the power structures they upheld; the very rhetorical compulsiveness and effectiveness of closure is also what Marxist and feminist scholars objected to. There have always been narratives that deliberately deny the reader or listener clear closure, but in the postmodern area, a deliberate refusal of closure has become part of the dominant mode of storytelling.

In planning theory, an aligned evolution away from great narratives and from comprehensive end-plans can be found in the shift from rational planning theory to more incremental planning practices. Recent thinking in planning theory and practice has increasingly emphasized the need to plan for uncertainty, and the importance of flexible and reversible planning. Seeing planning in terms of narrative closure and open-endedness provides one important approach towards those aims.

4. Applications

Telling a story that convincingly moves towards closure can be one way to add rhetorical power to a narrative in planning, and to convince the public, private-public partnerships, or various stakeholders, of the causal logic of particular decisions. But open-ended narratives in planning may have other benefits. When the borders of closure are drawn too rigidly, this may impede future adjustments to new challenges and be a check on the resilience and flexibility of a city. Stories have endings, but reality does not – and real-world cities never finish the process of transformation and adaptation. Planning narratives that are open-ended leave more room to envision alternative possibilities or future change, and more space for the agency of communities or individual citizens. In concrete terms, planning without closure would mean the inclusion of multiple alternative endings, allowing for a degree of multi-voicedness or polyphony; it would entail the explicit acknowledgement of doubts, ambiguities and uncertainties, and the incorporation of deliberate contradictions and gaps in planning texts and their visualizations. Such approaches are arguably already used to some extent in non-binding strategic planning, and are one area in which urban planning can learn from informal spatial planning.[15]

Related entries: Emplotment, Future Narratives, Path-dependency, Polyphony, Scenario

Further Reading

Abbott, H. Porter. "Closure." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. Ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan. London: Routledge, 2010. 65–66.

Ameel, Lieven. "Redemptive Scripts in the City Novel." *City Scripts: Narratives of Postindustrial Urban Futures*. Ed. Barbara Buchenau, Jens Martin Gurr, Maria Sulimma. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, forthcoming.

Antwerp. *Tussen stad en stoom. Het Masterplan Scheldekaaien Antwerpen*. Antwerp: City of Antwerp, 2011.

Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.