

Narrative

1. Definition

Narrative is when somebody at a particular occasion tells somebody else a real or fictional story.⁴⁰ An example of a narrative is someone telling someone else a personal anecdote; or when the narrator in a literary novel recounts a story to the reader; or when a newspaper reporter breaks a news story. This broad definition of narrative can be applied with relative ease to urban planning documents: planners (or a planning agency) can be seen as the narrator(s) who recount a *story*, usually aimed at the inhabitants of the area affected by planning, at the stakeholders, or at future planners. Most of the recounted events will be real enough (rather than fictional), but planning documents also tend to involve elements that are not real (yet), such as claims about what an area will look and feel like in the future.

To fully define a narrative, it is necessary to also define what makes a story. A story is defined here as having: 1. clearly outlined human (or human-like) characters doing things; 2. a change of situation, typically (but not necessarily) from balance to imbalance to balance; and 3. an association with mental states: human desires, fears, hopes may drive the events in the story, which are relevant also for why we are interested to hear about a particular story.⁴¹

2. Example

When the Helsinki mayor Jussi Pajunen spoke to reporters in September 2008, on the verge of the biggest boom in waterfront

development in the Finnish capital in over a century, he told his audience, drawing on the age-old image of Helsinki as feminine figure:

“The daughter of the Baltic [Helsinki] is submitting herself to the sea, her former hunting grounds.”⁴²

Fig. 8: Havis Amanda, allegory of Helsinki as daughter of the Baltic.



Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Havis_Amanda_sculpture_by_Ville_Vallgren_in_Helsinki_\(29484842696\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Havis_Amanda_sculpture_by_Ville_Vallgren_in_Helsinki_(29484842696).jpg). Archives of the Finnish Broadcasting Company Yle

Here we have someone (Pajunen) telling someone (reporters, and through them, the general public) on some occasion (September 2008) that something happened (Helsinki's development is opening up toward the shore and reaching into the sea) for a particular reason, and drawing on particular symbolic imagery to provide a sense of historical continuity and causality to the story he tells (see fig. 8).

We here see something quite typical of how narratives in the context of planning tend to be presented: the city itself appears as the human (or human-like) main character in the story Pajunen tells, and a change for the better is at the heart of the story.

3. Explanation

Planning has been defined also as a form of "persuasive storytelling".⁴³ The focus on persuasiveness suggests that planning narratives are primarily about convincing the intended audiences about the course of action to be taken, and using rhetorical strategies to reach their goal. The speech by Mayor Pajunen used rhetorics – the symbol of the daughter of the Baltic Sea – to present unprecedented urban development as in line with the historical image of the Finnish capital, even as rectifying a historical wrong. Several of the narratives found in contemporary planning documents issued by the Helsinki City Planning Department use similar rhetorical images.

But narrative also involves other elements. Narratives are means of making sense of the world, and contain frames of knowledge that describe reality but also prescribe how we are able to make sense of reality, and how we are able to envision our possibilities to change the world. Storytelling in this sense provides "a major reservoir of the cultural baggage that enables us to make meaning out of a chaotic world and the incomprehensible events taking place in it".⁴⁴ When planners engage in storytelling, they are not only persuading audiences, but also trying to make sense of the world. And narrative tends to include a sense of entertainment, of enjoyment in the creative performativity of storytelling, even in the bleakest of stories. Bringing out the narrative elements in planning may be a more effective mode

of communicating not only because it draws on pervasive rhetorical strategies, but also because it speaks to the human interest of being gripped by a compelling story in its own right.

There are a wide variety of different kinds of narratives in the context of urban planning. People tell each other personal stories of a city that changes; policy makers and politicians tell the media stories of decisions for a brighter future; stories are written down in letters or posted on social media. Urban planning itself is also a form of storytelling, in which planners communicate with other branches in the city, stakeholders and private interests through documents, meetings, and media outreach.

In terms of how narratives relate to urban planning, three different categories can be outlined:

1. The existing narratives of a location, prior to planning: local, everyday stories; artistic representations; historical or other documents;
2. The narrative texts and practices involved in planning itself;
3. The narratives parallel or posterior to the planning proper, for example in branding or placemaking strategies, but also in the way local stories react to and communicate with planning and development of an area.

These three types are called here, respectively: narratives *for* planning (narratives that planners can draw on in their practices); narratives *in* planning (the planning process as a form of story-telling); narratives *of* planning (the storytelling that follows in the wake of planning practices).

4. Applications

Narratives *for* planning are perhaps what has interested planners most during the past few decades: the experiential local knowledge embedded in local narratives, from oral histories to literary novels to songs and folklore about a particular place. The cartography of narratives of place has been advocated by several urban thinkers as a

method to enable planners to form an idea of the broader narrative framework within which they are operating. A narrative mapping of a particular area, guided by conceptualizations from literary and narrative theory, would approach narratives not in the way these describe (rather statically) a particular environment as mere dots on a map. It would, instead, focus on the dynamic role played by location in relation to plot and character development; on metaphoricizations of the area, and on the interaction between the location and the literary frames or genre features it triggers.

Narratives for planning are increasingly seen as important experiential information whose successful adaptation in the planning process could lead to more inclusive and democratic planning. However, if the aim of participatory narrative practices is to let local voices be heard more clearly, efforts should be made to ensure a transparent selection process and a coherent analysis and adaptation of these narratives. To ensure that the original narratives do not get lost in the process of summarizing and re-writing, one first step would be to at least keep these available for future reference, for example in the form of open-access databases.

Related entries: Future Narratives, Narrativity, Scenario

Further Reading

- Ameel, Lieven. "Towards a Narrative Typology of Urban Planning Narratives for, in, and of Planning in Jätkäsaari, Helsinki." *Urban Design International* 22, no. 4 (2016): 318–330.
- Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds. What Is, What If, As If*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2022.
- Throgmorton, James A. "Storytelling and City Crafting in a Contested Age: One Mayor's Practice Story." *Planners in Politics: Do They Make a Difference?* Ed. Louis Albrechts. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publications, 2020. 174–197.

