

Scenario

1. Definition

A scenario, especially in the field of future studies⁷⁹, is a description of a potential future development, usually presented in the form of alternative possible developments. A scenario can be merely sketched or fully developed.

2. Example

Research on the future of urban mobility frequently works with different scenarios. To take one example from the Ruhr region, these may include, for instance, alternative versions of the future in which (1) rapid technological innovation will have led to largely automated mobility systems ('smart mobility'), (2) a concern with human health and well-being will have led to an emphasis on walkability, bikeability and electrically-powered public transport with an inner-city ban on fossil-fuel vehicles ('healthy city'), (3), inhospitable living conditions in cities will have led to deurbanization, or (4) the present-day situation continues as it is (commonly referred to as 'business as usual'). Frequently, there is also a scenario that combines elements of the other scenarios (5). Each of these scenarios may be outlined in a short text accompanied by suggestive visualisations (see fig. 15).

Fig. 15: Scenarios for future urban mobility and settlement patterns originally developed for Germany's Ruhr region. A frequently formulated scenario not visualized here is one in which drastic environmental degradation will have led to the enforced imposition of radical measures ('eco-dictatorship').



Source: Institute of City Planning and Urban Design, University of Duisburg-Essen. Used by permission

Fully developed scenarios focus on turning points and on chains of causality that lead up to particular futures. They are often structured around powerful metaphors, which tend to be used in titles of particular scenarios ('smart city', 'healthy city') to describe but also to make a rhetorical argument for particular possible worlds, and for the decisions that will lead to a chosen future. The presentation of

alternative futures side by side tends to be a potent way to engage readers, who are drawn into the imagined storyworld to consider the ‘what if’ of possible developments. It also suggests a degree of impartiality – after all, alternative scenarios suggest that readers are allowed to make up their own mind about the desirability or feasibility of particular futures. In most cases, the way the scenarios are presented guides the reader towards one or two of them. Thus, the ‘business as usual’ scenario in the example above is presented in a distinctively negative light.

3. Explanation

The development of scenario techniques can be traced to military strategies during the Cold War, with Herman Kahn of the RAND Corporation combining game theory and fictional stories to devise possible strategies in the face of nuclear threats. An awareness of possible future developments and their impacts on a given system (a city, a region, the nation state, the planet as a whole) is clearly crucial to any responsible and circumspect planning and strategy development. Two distinct methods used in scenarios are back-casting and forecasting. While forecasting starts out with the present and extrapolates developments towards the future, back-casting tends to start out from an imagined desirable future and then tracks the possible pathways capable of leading to that future from our present day – a method that is close to what happens when we read science fiction or near-future utopian literature (such as Edward Bellamy’s 1888 utopian novel *Looking Backward*). The development of future scenarios and the testing of alternative parameter settings in terms of their impact on a given system are an important bridge between literature and planning. One of the functions of literature is that it serves as a form of symbolic action, as a social experiment free from the constraints of everyday life – literature as ‘depragmatised behaviour in rehearsal’, which makes it possible symbolically to try out in fiction different scenarios or potential solutions for key societal issues. A classic formulation is Dieter Wellershoff’s, who spoke of literature as a “space of simulation for alternative behaviour

in rehearsal at reduced risk".⁸⁰ However, literary texts frequently do not attempt to solve a problem by imposing an answer – and even if they do, they are often less interesting for the answer they propose than for having asked the question and providing some insights into what is at stake. In this, of course, literary texts differ greatly from planning documents.

4. Applications

The most important contribution of alternative scenarios might lie in their narrative characteristics: more elaborate scenarios can give insights into the complex storyworlds and values that underlie possible decisions. Moreover, future scenarios that draw on literary fiction could give some insights into what a particular possible future might actually feel like, for example by including narrative characters – a way to envision the future as already inhabited by people with real senses and affects, rather than envisioning the future as a blank slate waiting to be colonized.⁸¹ One specific type of working with scenarios at the intersection between planning studies and literary/cultural studies is research on the potential role of science fiction for planning.⁸²

In addition to allowing for more informed decision-making, scenarios also have a purpose in the context of planning with uncertainty. Climate research, for instance, has long realized the need to think in terms of scenarios rather than pretending that developments can be predicted with a high degree of certainty. Different scenarios – whether for demographic developments, climate change and environmental degradation or different technological developments – can also help urban planners to decide what would be meaningful choices ("What would we be doing anyway? What would be helpful under any circumstances?"). Thinking in terms of scenarios might help planners to become aware of path-dependencies and to remain aware that the potential closure provided by one plan may be the origin of a new planning problem. Scenario techniques can thus aid in developing potentially reversible planning solutions in and for conditions of uncertainty.

Related entries: Closure, Future Narratives, Path-dependency, Scripts

Further Reading

- Ameel, Lieven. *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning: Plotting the Helsinki Waterfront*. New York: Routledge, 2021.
- Gurr, Jens Martin. *Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City*. New York: Routledge, 2021. 125–140. [open access, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111009>].
- Sandercock, Leonie. “From the Campfire to the Computer: An Epistemology of Multiplicity and the Story Turn in Planning.” *Multimedia Explorations in Urban Policy and Planning: Beyond the Flatlands*. Ed. Leonie Sandercock, Giovanni Attili. Heidelberg/London/New York: Springer, 2010. 17–37.

