Narrativity

1. Definition

Narrativity is the ability to evoke stories.[45] A building, or a built environment, cannot literally tell a story, neither can a map or a random list. But buildings, maps, and urban form can have narrativity, by suggesting or bringing to mind particular stories.

2. Example

An image in a planning document that shows what a future seashore development will look like, such as the view of Hanseatic-looking future buildings at the West Harbor's waterfront in Helsinki (see fig. 9), can be deeply suggestive of past and future stories of the area and its development. In this particular case, the image is evocative of a story that feeds into the overall narrative of planning of the Helsinki waterfront in terms of integration of the waterfront within the existing urban structure. The image gestures toward historical continuation and highlights the moment of completion towards which the plan is moving. Similar to an image, a building or construction, too, can have narrativity, something which the Helsinki planning department implicitly suggests in the document "Maritime Helsinki in the City Plan", which describes possible windmill farms on the Helsinki coast as communicating to the future viewer a message that evokes the story of "a city of high-tech and ecological know-how", where "sustainable energy should be visible".[46]

Fig. 9: Waterfront in the West Harbour of Helsinki.

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3. Explanation

Narrativity is one way in which urban development can be linked to an area's existing history or to a community's heritage. Planning with narrativity is also a way to evoke place identities where stories of an area's identity are only gradually taking shape, such as in a post-industrial harbour development or a new suburban development. Much of what has fallen under the term of "placemaking" in planning deals in effect with designing with narativity. Red bricks and industrial rail lines that are kept as part of a new development may be intended to activate the narrativity of such historical built elements, and to evoke stories of the working-class history of an area. Artworks in public space can have a similar aim. The work "Line Drawn in the Water", an artwork twelve meters high in the East Harbour development in Helsinki, consists of a canoe raised on a curved metal pole, which references historical and contemporary sea-faring technologies as well as the area's maritime history.

Place name practices are one way in which planners, in collaboration with naming agencies, engage with the narrativity of the built

environment. The Helsinki East Harbour showcases several examples of imaginative use of place names: names of streets and public squares or quays refer evocatively to the area's blue-collar history, to its maritime history, or to ships that had their home port in the area, as well as to the islands erased in the construction of the harbour during the twentieth century.

Working with narrativity may also be about creating a space for specific kinds of activities with the aim to give rise to new stories of how a particular area is used. This comes close to what Richard Sennett had in mind when calling for "narrative spaces"; spaces that "permit certain properties of narratives to operate in everyday life."[47] In the planning of the Jätkäsaari area in Helsinki, elevation differences in the central park were explicitly designed to invite sledging activities. Planning for temporary use is one other way in which an area's narrativity can be steered in particular directions. In the Helsinki East Harbour, various examples of temporary use, including a DIY sauna and what is advertised as the longest graffiti wall in Northern Europe, feed into broader narratives of the area as a creative hub.[48]

4. Applications

When aiming to enhance or steer the narrativity of the built environment, it makes sense to aim for storylines that are aligned with (or at the very least aware of) the historical background of the area, that are coherent with the overall narratives in the planning area, and that have a reasonable degree of probability. Here, as elsewhere, it may be good to bear in mind Aristotle's suggestion to storytellers to focus on events that are "possible by the standards of probability and necessity".[49] Planners and policy makers will be taken to task when the stories that are evoked by plans, 3D images, naming practices, and buildings, are one-sided, incoherent, improbable, or when they are lacking in inclusiveness and diversity. Signs in the public realm are one way in which the narrativity of an area can be geared toward an otherwise lost or silenced history, from memorial plaques with references to disappearing natural diversity, to stumbling stones

(*Stolpersteine*) commemorating the latest place of residence of victims of Nazi extermination or persecution, in Germany and elsewhere.

Period and genre conventions will define in part how the narrativity of a built environment evokes new stories. A medieval castle in the city may have been meant in its original context to evoke stories about the power of a feudal lord over recalcitrant burgers, but in the twenty-first century, its meanings will have dramatically shifted. Red bricks in twenty-first century developments may have been intended to suggest working-class history, but may be interpreted by onlookers as yet another example of generic planning, or as an inability on the planners' side to think beyond established clichés of a particular city. Construction of the story itself happens in the head of the onlooker, and as always, there is the possibility of unintended meanings and associations. If interventions in public space, or new building developments, are constructed with little concern for past layers of meaning, or for future users or inhabitants, these will find means to circumvent intended use or meaning. The challenge of planning with narrativity is to provide a measure of coherence while also being aware of the multiplicity and open-endedness of how city narratives are used and read.

Related entries: Closure, Genre, Narrative, Palimpsest, Path-dependency

Further Reading

Ameel, Lieven. *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning: Plotting the Helsinki Waterfront*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

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Ryan, Marie-Laure. "The Modes of Narrativity and their Visual Metaphors." *Style* 26, no. 3 (1992): 368–387.

White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *On Narrative*. Ed. W.J.T. Mitchell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981. 1–24.