

Introduction

City planning thrives on future-oriented imagination and on visions of the possible city, created in dialogue with citizens as well as with policymakers. It is intimately bound up with forms of storytelling, so much so that planning has been defined in recent decades as inherently a narrative activity, a form of “persuasive storytelling”, or even the act of city story-writing.¹ Planning is concerned with envisioning the future state of an individual plot of land, a neighbourhood or an entire district, and in its textual materials and policy texts, it will tend to describe the transition from a present-day state to this desired future state. More implicitly, through maps, digital 3D renderings or scaled physical models, it will evoke particular narrative frames with which to approach urban problems and their solutions. In literary studies, precisely this – the rendering of a change from situation A to situation B – is regarded as the kernel of any story. Whenever planners address city administrators, investors, inhabitants, and other stakeholders, they make use of the persuasive function of narrative. In doing so, they may appeal, for example, to a neighbourhood’s or a district’s past and thus to its sense of identity; and they will seek to tell a plausible story of how future developments can either be seen as building on that past or as promising a new start.

The insight that narrative is an essential part of planning has led to a considerable research literature by planning theorists, and even to a “narrative turn in urban planning”.² But this narrative turn has not consistently entered planning practice. In our view, at least, it is rarely being used in a way that realizes the consequences of this insight. Planners, we argue, should be aware of the functions, effects

and consequences of narratives for their practice: Specific narrative patterns can be powerful tools for persuasion, and will be beneficial for connecting future plans with past historical layers of meaning. Planners could be made more aware of the complex meaning-making functions, the ideological implications and the very real effects of particular narrative strategies. They should also be aware of the persuasive and potentially manipulative effects of narratives.

The term narrative has recently seen an inflationary use and is often uncritically employed in a wide range of fields (narrative economics and narrative change management are just two examples).³ We therefore aim to identify, define, and illustrate key terms in the context of narrative and planning in a way that is grounded in rigorous research but that is also immediately applicable to particular planning contexts.

This book is a practical field guide to narrative aimed at planners, and written by three literary scholars. As literary scholars, in addition to our *research* on the role of narratives in planning, we have in various ways been involved in planning *practice*, training planning scholars and planning practitioners, collaborating with planners in interdisciplinary projects, or working on consulting projects that advised municipalities on how to harness the power of stories in urban development. What we set out to do is to make insights from narrative research accessible to planners; more precisely, we explain key concepts and terms that originate largely in literary studies and show how an awareness of the ways in which narratives work is directly relevant for planners. In deliberately focusing on eighteen central terms and concepts, we do not attempt any kind of exhaustive inventory nor a planning history, but a practical glossary of key concepts in the field of narrative in planning. Both in the choice of terms and concepts and in each individual entry, we focus on usability and applicability: What do planners need to know in order to use narrative approaches responsibly in their practice? What makes narratives coherent, effective, probable, persuasive, even individually and collectively necessary – but also potentially harmful, manipulative and divisive? How can narratives help build more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive communities?

This book should be useful to anyone who is working on the intersection between the built environment and the world as it is conceived, imagined and debated. Taking our cue mostly from terms originating in literary studies and exploring their reach in the field of planning, we also aim to reach literary scholars working on real-world problems or seeking to apply their insights in what has often come to be called third-mission projects, outreach, or community engagement projects. One other possible audience consists of humanities scholars who wish to train students with an eye to fields of employment outside academia and the teaching profession. We therefore hope this book may also be of use as a first stepping stone for undergraduate or graduate students.

In part, the idea for this book developed in reaction to an increasing proliferation of storytelling terminology in fields outside of literary studies. It is not inspired by any desire to reclaim a terminology, but is spurred on, rather, by the need to bring together interdisciplinary theory and everyday practice around robust academic research, combining theoretical rigour with hands-on applicability.

This is not merely a matter of an insistence on precise terminology. Narratives shape perceptions and perceptions shape reality – think of investment decisions or residential preferences: If a neighbourhood is often enough represented as being unsafe, people may not want to live there or buy property there; the same, of course, is true of travel choices. Moreover, narrative not only persuasively *conveys* knowledge, it also *shapes* and even *produces* knowledge. Form and content are inseparable in stories: Narrative patterns and metaphors are not chosen to decorate the story once it is there, they do not come on top of a plan or garnish it – rather, they fundamentally contribute to the meaning of a story. Every narrative is unique: when a story is told in different ways, by using different plot patterns or central images, the result is a different kind of narrative with different functions and effects.⁴

Finally, the global diffusion of influential concepts and blueprints for urban development – from Ebenezer Howard’s ‘Garden City’ to today’s ‘Smart City’ – is not best explained by how well such concepts respond to urban challenges; rather, the popular success of such travelling models is often better explained by the way they are success-

fully framed by means of compelling narratives.⁵ As has been shown for the ‘Smart City’, for instance, this can largely be regarded as an instance of “corporate storytelling”.⁶ If urban planning is essentially a story-telling activity, urban planners and students of urban planning and architecture will need expertise in storytelling. This book will provide them with practical definitions, examples, and directions for further applications.

Our deliberately selective list of key terms can broadly be grouped into three categories: (1) a majority of terms that originate in literary studies and that have been or might be used to make sense of urban problems (terms such as narrative, emplotment, genre); (2) conversely, a smaller number of terms that are primarily applied to urban phenomena but that gain depth if supplemented by a literary studies perspective (terms such as path-dependency or place-making); (3) terms that are widely used in a broad range of fields, if frequently with different meanings (terms such as model, or scenario).

Each entry provides a brief definition of the term, an example, a brief explanation of the concept including its origins and key implications, a discussion of potential further applications, a list of related entries, and a few very selective suggestions for further reading. In our choice of examples, we do not seek to be representative or to cover the broadest possible range of different cities; rather, we draw on some of the examples we know best from our own research, such as Antwerp, the German Ruhr region, Helsinki, and New York City.

The entries are self-contained and can be read individually, and this book is primarily meant to serve as a reference work. But the entries can also be read in sequence, and, taken together, they provide an overview of key terms and concepts from the field and may, we hope, serve alike planning practitioners and literary scholars with a view to real-world applications.