Polyphony

1. Definition

Polyphony is literally multi-voicedness: the ability of a text or story to include several different voices and perspectives, undisrupted by an overarching authorial voice.

2. Example

Located in Antwerp along the river Scheldt, the flood wall of the river quays displays an ingenious piece of poetry in public space: the Quay Poem, composed by the official Antwerp city poet Peter Holvoet-Hanssen (see fig. 13). The poem was painted in 2011 in bright white on more than 3 kilometres of length of the concrete wall looking out to the river Scheldt. The text is a collage of different voices: more than 500 inhabitants of Antwerp sent in verses and lines, on the basis of which the city poet composed what he called a "stream of words of the city".[68] The text also includes selected verses from other Antwerp poets. One particularity of the text is that the different voices are not presented in summarised or paraphrased form, but are explicitly indicated as separate utterances by being placed within quotation marks. As such, the text provides a true multi-voiced narrative of and by the city's inhabitants. The poem was realised in part by the city's planning department as part of their outreach for the redevelopment of the quays. But more than anything, the polyphonic Quay Poem provides a stark contrast with the dominant single-voicedness

that is typically found in urban planning texts – including those produced by the city of Antwerp.

Fig. 13: Image of the Antwerp Quay poem.

Photo by Lieven Ameel. 30 April 2019

3. Explanation

Cities are by definition polyphonic; they are always "the intersections of multiple narratives".[69] As planning has become more dialogic and deliberative, it increasingly aims to include a more diverse range of urban voices and to take into account more diverse kinds of knowledge. In other words, it aims to become more *polyphonic*: planning that is aware of, and embraces, the manifold voices it caters for.

A first step is to survey the diversity of different local voices that exist prior to planning, an overview of narratives *for* planning.[70] Several planning thinkers emphasize the plurality of narratives that arises from a closer look at local narratives. Perhaps the biggest challenge encountered is that of enabling planning not just to reflect on the diversity of urban narratives, but to incorporate the local narratives in such a way that "policies and plans … represent a collective authorship between people and planners".[71] One of the principal

aims of the 'discursive', 'dialogic' or 'narrative' turn in planning practices was to let the hitherto passive recipients of planning narratives become a more active part of the story-telling in which they are enmeshed, to let the 'objects' of formerly mono-voiced practices be active producers of the meaning-making that affects them.

In literary studies, polyphony is connected first and foremost with the figure of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), who developed his theory of polyphony in an influential study of the work of Dostoevsky. For the study of urban planning narratives, Bakhtin's concept of polyphony has particular relevance because of the way it examines different voices within one and the same body of text. The inclusion of a multitude of voices, in the terminology of Bakhtin, does not come from outside the text, then, to enrich it, but it is part and parcel of the text itself, within it, and taking the form of a dialogic imagination. The Quay Poem by Holvoet-Hanssen is a unique example of such dialogic imagination at work: a text that gives voice to other authors beyond the one named author, and that continues multiple voices that exist independently. Interestingly, for our purpose, Bakhtin does not define polyphony as merely a literary method, but also as a principle of human relationships.[72]

4. Applications

The polyphony of urban voices touches on some of the most urgent questions faced by planning practices, in particular the legitimacy of planning practices and the status of different kinds of knowledge. With current advances in participatory planning geographic information systems (PPGIS), the mapping of different experiences of a particular planning site has become ever more feasible. But gathering big data on a place through PPGIS is not the same as being able to make sense of the wealth of qualitative data that may be the result. The greatest challenge is not to accurately survey urban polyphony, but to create planning texts that include such a diversity of voices.

Can planning by truly polyphonic? Is it possible for urban planning practices, with their binding legal procedures and their highly formalized textual and visual outcomes, to include diverging voices

that are independent of the authorial voice of the planning department? Some incremental polyphonic elements can be be part of a move toward more polyphonic planning. One element is to include, within a planning text, some relevant personal stories, for example as vignettes set apart from the main text. This has become a widespread practice that can also be seen in *Between City and Stream*, the masterplan for the Antwerp Quays. The master plan is announced as "a story that in many respects is told by many"; and readers will hear "the many voices [of 800 participating Antwerp citizens] resounding throughout many places in this brochure." (3)

There is always the risk that such quotes constitute no more than mere tokenism on the ladder of participation.[73] But, especially when quoted in their original form, and with proper information on the context of the original utterance, such diverging voices are able not only to give a sense of the polyphony underlying one particular plan, but to bring in some of that complexity into its storytelling. The typical way of using vignettes of quotes by inhabitants is to use them to support the key arguments within a planning narrative. But Bakhtinian polyphony contains the suggestion that a narrative text may contain contradictory narratives, and this consequence of polyphony is worth considering. Would it be possible to include in a plan the stories – even by way of vignettes – of how different inhabitants see the development of their city, even if these are stories that run counter to the dominant current? We are not aware of planning texts that deliberately set out to do this, but including such a truly polyphonic, even contradictory, set of storylines may have unforeseen benefits. It could point the way towards more inclusive planning, and allow possibilities for multiple alternatives, which may limit the path-dependency of a particular plan.

Related entries: Closure, Path-dependency

Further Reading

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