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# NARRATIVE IN URBAN PLANNING

A Practical Field Guide



[transcript] Urban Studies

## From:

*Lieven Ameel, Jens Martin Gurr, Barbara Buchenau*

### **Narrative in Urban Planning**

#### A Practical Field Guide

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What do planners need to know in order to use narrative approaches responsibly in their practice? This practical field guide makes insights from narrative research accessible to planners through a glossary of key concepts in the field of narrative in planning. What makes narratives coherent, probable, persuasive, even necessary – but also potentially harmful, manipulative and divisive? How can narratives help to build more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive communities? The authors are literary scholars who have extensive experience in planning practice, training planning scholars and practitioners or advising municipalities on how to harness the power of stories in urban development.

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## Sources

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This book builds on our own long-standing research in historical as well as contemporary literary and cultural urban studies and in related fields. In the text, we draw on individual formulations, passages and examples from the following texts:

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## ***Introduction***

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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”.<sup>2</sup> 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).<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> As has been shown for the 'Smart City', for instance, this can largely be regarded as an instance of "corporate storytelling".<sup>6</sup> 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.

# Ambiguity

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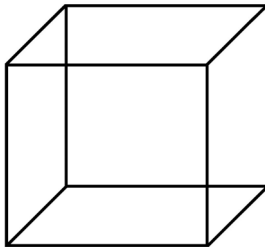
## 1. Definition

Ambiguity may be defined as the phenomenon of a term, an utterance, a text, an image or a concept having several meanings or potential interpretations, the Greek “ambi-” root strictly speaking suggesting exactly two meanings.

## 2. Example

At the simplest level, many common words in everyday language are ambiguous, words like “set” or “bank” (both as nouns and as verbs) being obvious examples. Visually, the so-called Necker cube (see fig. 1) is a well-known example: It is unclear whether we are looking at the cube from above or from below.

*Fig. 1: Necker cube; source:  
Daniel Bläser, [www.dbgrafik.de](http://www.dbgrafik.de)*



### 3. Explanation

Ambiguity may arise at several levels and may have several causes: Thus – at least – between verbal, syntactic and semantic or conceptual ambiguity. Moreover, ambiguity needs to be distinguished from related terms such as ambivalence or contradiction, which, although frequently treated as overlapping concepts or even as synonymous, should be regarded as different categories from diverse fields of intellectual inquiry. While ambivalence is originally a psychological or cognitive concept designating a state of indecision, undecidability or unclear evaluation, contradiction is a notion from logic designating two or more irreconcilable propositions. Ambiguity, by contrast, is originally a rhetorical concept, referring to the simultaneous presence of more than one possible meaning or interpretation. Ambiguity in a text may be the *result* of attitudinal ambivalence, which manifests itself in unresolved contradictions in the text. But ambiguity is just as much a result of an act of observation and its accompanying sense of uncertainty and multiplicity. In any longer document, ambiguity may also be the result of a sequence of propositions which, each in themselves, are unambiguous but irreconcilable with one another. Even if any individual passage is perfectly clear, the unharmonized concatenation of contradictory passages, as its cumulative effect, may still create an ambiguity of the text as a whole. This sequential type of ambiguity may be the result of ambivalent attitudes on the part of one author, but it may also be the result of an unsuccessful attempt at harmonizing or combining a plenitude of interests. In a more positive sense, however, ambiguity does not have to be seen as the *result* of an imprecise use of language. Rather, language, and especially literary language, often allows for the resolution, suspension, or sublation – one might more critically also speak of the glossing over – of a multiplicity of possible meanings or of contradictions in a type of deliberate ambiguity.

While, in planning theory, there is a substantial discussion about issues of complexity, this is hardly the case with ambiguity. In the few contributions that exist, ambiguity generally appears as a problem to be solved.<sup>7</sup> Where related terms such as (un)certainty, flexibility and fuzziness rather than ambiguity are used in planning debates,

in each case, it seems, there are conflicts of interest with regard to the openness as opposed to determinacy of planning policies, regulations and individual plans. Here, too, there is a tendency to regard ambiguity as ultimately problematic.

#### 4. Applications

Think of the various living labs that have been sprouting up on the campuses of universities in the past decade: at Stanford, urban researchers meet with stakeholders – citizens, farmers, business-people and politicians – to experiment with and discuss a variety of scenarios to deal with water scarcity in Amman and Pune. In Amsterdam, partners from research institutions as well as the private and the public sector jointly seek to develop small-scale solutions to wicked urban problems.<sup>8</sup> In both cases, there is plenty of ambiguity concerning the roles, the authority and the leverage of all of the actors involved, and a great part of the challenge of these labs is the effective management of this ambiguity. While most professions – law, medicine, technology, planning – will generally seek to eliminate or at least to minimize ambiguity, scholars of narrative have argued that ambiguity may also foster social cohesion: By accepting “doubt and plurality or plenty [as] the twin poles of ambiguity”, by allowing more diverse groups of stakeholders to find points of identification but also contention, narratives attain a certain fuzziness and indeterminacy.<sup>9</sup> These ambiguity-tolerant narratives leave room for interpretation, for adverse readings and for negotiation; precisely because of this communal interpretive work involved they are *more* rather than *less* socially binding than precise narratives, and thus *more* conducive to generating social cohesion and to canvassing public support.<sup>10</sup> A classic case in point would be programmes of political parties, which, if too specific, could hardly generate broad support across different societal groups and coalitions of interest.

Thus, while one will hardly want to suggest that planning documents – let alone legal texts or contracts – should deliberately be ambiguous, it may be helpful to bear in mind this social function of ambiguity. Not only is the tolerance of ambiguity a central ability for



individuals to function in complex, highly differentiated social environments. Ambiguous documents – or those which allow different stakeholders complementary, possibly even contradictory means of identification and interpretation – may productively function as “boundary objects”, objects or frames of knowledge which are flexible enough to be adopted by different communities.<sup>11</sup>

**Related entries:** Closure, Future Narratives, Metaphor, Scenario

### Further Reading

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# Closure

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## 1. Definition

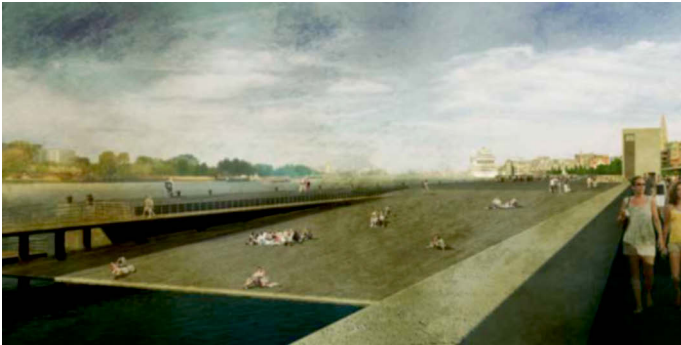
Closure is the resolution, in the ending of a story, of the conflicts and tensions described. When a story has closure, a perceived imbalance is restored; a difficulty is finally overcome; good or evil get their rewards. Closure is what gives a meaning and a purpose to all that has preceded it; it gives a story a sense of completeness, and as such, it is closely bound up with why readers or listeners are compelled and moved – also affectively – by stories. Closure ensures that the expectations of the reader, raised in the course of the narration, are satisfied. While closure is the expected norm in literature and everyday storytelling, there are any number of stories that deny the reader or listener a satisfying ending. In the context of planning, closure relates not only to the ending of a planning narrative, but also to how a proposed plan can provide a sense of closure after urban degeneration or periods of tensions between competing interests in a city.

## 2. Example

The twenty-first century plans for the redevelopment of the Antwerp Quays (2010) are constructed around providing closure to a story in which the conflicting interests had for too long been unresolved, to the dissatisfaction of the public. The Quays, located near the city centre along the right bank of the Scheldt, 6,8km long and roughly 100m in width, had been left neglected for decades, separating the city from the water. Potentially prime real estate was used for

parking – the “most beautiful car parking space in Europe”.<sup>12</sup> In the master plan for the Scheldt Quays, the redeveloping of the Quays balances the legacy of the post-industrial waterfront with the demands of rising water levels to restore the connection between the river and the city. Not only the quays, but also the city is described as achieving a degree of completeness as the result of the plan. The example is typical of a plan visualizing the moment of closure when an imbalance is restored or a conflict resolved. An interesting twist – found in a range of similar post-industrial waterfront developments – is that the narrative closure tends to coincide with an opening up of the urban public space to a public that had only limited access to these sites, from the industrial era onward. Narrative closure tends to presuppose that the end-state has been preordained, or is somehow natural or inevitable, which is one of the reasons why closure can lend a powerful rhetoric to policy narratives. The plans for the Antwerp Quays (see fig. 2) emphasize that the plans return to the citizens and the city what is rightfully theirs, enabling the city to fulfil part of its natural destiny as a city defined by the river.<sup>13</sup>

*Fig. 2: Visualisation of the Zuidersluis, Antwerp Quays. Source: © PROAP and City of Antwerp, 2011*



### 3. Explanation

Closure is the ending that gives meaning to all that has come before. In classical tragedy and comedy, the final scene is what decides whether a play will be a tragedy (ending tragically) or a comedy (ending well). A meaningful ending is not only the expected norm – although not necessarily upheld – of many literary texts, but of all forms of narrative: closure is akin to the closing statements in everyday conversations, a way to wrap up what has been told, but also to summarise its meaning and relevance.<sup>14</sup> In classical rhetorics, closure is what enables an artwork to be complete and wholesome, and hence both convincing and aesthetically pleasing. In everyday storytelling and also in literary texts, closure is associated with the final utterings of narration. Planning texts in many ways operate quite differently – nobody expects people to read planning documents from end to end – and it is more productive to think of the plan itself as providing closure to a storyline that is set out in the course of planning documents.

In postmodern theory, closure has generally become suspect. Closure was deemed to be aligned with the ideologically flawed “great narratives” and the power structures they upheld; the very rhetorical compulsiveness and effectiveness of closure is also what Marxist and feminist scholars objected to. There have always been narratives that deliberately deny the reader or listener clear closure, but in the postmodern area, a deliberate refusal of closure has become part of the dominant mode of storytelling.

In planning theory, an aligned evolution away from great narratives and from comprehensive end-plans can be found in the shift from rational planning theory to more incremental planning practices. Recent thinking in planning theory and practice has increasingly emphasized the need to plan for uncertainty, and the importance of flexible and reversible planning. Seeing planning in terms of narrative closure and open-endedness provides one important approach towards those aims.

## 4. Applications

Telling a story that convincingly moves towards closure can be one way to add rhetorical power to a narrative in planning, and to convince the public, private-public partnerships, or various stakeholders, of the causal logic of particular decisions. But open-ended narratives in planning may have other benefits. When the borders of closure are drawn too rigidly, this may impede future adjustments to new challenges and be a check on the resilience and flexibility of a city. Stories have endings, but reality does not – and real-world cities never finish the process of transformation and adaptation. Planning narratives that are open-ended leave more room to envision alternative possibilities or future change, and more space for the agency of communities or individual citizens. In concrete terms, planning without closure would mean the inclusion of multiple alternative endings, allowing for a degree of multi-voicedness or polyphony; it would entail the explicit acknowledgement of doubts, ambiguities and uncertainties, and the incorporation of deliberate contradictions and gaps in planning texts and their visualizations. Such approaches are arguably already used to some extent in non-binding strategic planning, and are one area in which urban planning can learn from informal spatial planning.<sup>15</sup>

**Related entries:** Emplotment, Future Narratives, Path-dependency, Polyphony, Scenario

## Further Reading

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