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Storytelling of and for Planning

Urban Planning through Participatory Narrative-building

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Abstract

Storytelling is the oldest form of communication and still finds various areas of application in urban planning, ranging from communicating visions to citizens to co-creating narratives as a tool for participatory practice. This paper elaborates “storytelling for planning”, describing the background, its application as workshops in the project +CityxChange and replication potential. The workshops are an integral part of the knowledge development and exchange in- and outside the project and contribute to intra-project collaboration and clustering. Led by ISOCARP Institute, the Storytelling Workshops are jointly organised with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), as well as the project cities. To ensure an active exchange with other stakeholders and Smart Cities and Communities (SCC-01) projects, representatives of other projects are invited to the workshops.

Keywords

Storytelling, Participation, Communication, Urban Planning

1. Introduction

Storytelling in participatory planning and design became a crucial element of urban practice. Yet, many different types exist, ranging from linear to multi-dimensional, or from informing-only to citizen-led practices. This paper explores the less conventional approach of storytelling as a planning methodology. The work builds upon storytelling workshops which are carried out as part of the European Union Horizon 2020 funded +CityxChange project which develops positive energy blocks in seven European cities with a key focus on citizen involvement. Further, the paper builds upon the work of Anderson, Davidson, Devos, Gambarato, Sinek, and most importantly, Throgmorton and Van Hulst.

Storytelling is the oldest form of communication and was used long before written or visual communication. It was the primary form of historical information being transferred from generation to generation. Despite the multiplicity of media forms today, it still has a crucial role in communicating messages in a variety of fields – ranging from marketing to entertainment and policymaking, among many others. In principal a story consists of a collection or body of stories about characters joined in some common problem as fixers (heroes), causes (villains) or harmed (victims) in a temporal trajectory (plot), leading towards resolution within a particular setting or context. It is constituted by the plot, character, and moral of the story. The anticipated goal of a story depends on who is telling and listens to the story, as well as where, why and when it takes place and is perceived. Stories are used across various fields, mostly with the goal to build a narrative which conveys a certain message or builds a common vision. A story starts usually in the past and expands into the future, evolving into a shared goal, justification, or vision for the audience; therefore, generating support for the process and justifying the ways it is implemented and what it results in or what the direct implications and consequences are.

Two types of storytelling can be identified: Linear knowledge transfer processes and cyclical processes of knowledge mobilisation. The first describes a linear process from producers to users (storytelling of planning), while the latter focuses on reciprocal exchange to foster co-creation to generate and collect information through the narratives from the community (storytelling for planning). The collective development of narratives through stories can strengthen the communal agency of the citizen while it can be used to improve the perspectives of other stakeholder groups better by collaboratively or independently creating fictitious narratives and stories. This can highlight potential mismatches between expectation and reality of the needs of the community, while also helping to gain additional insights by choosing a different perspective before advancing to other citizen engagement elements in the planning process.

In the project +CityxChange, storytelling is seen as one of the methods and tools for enabling Open Innovation 2.0 inside the project, in exchange with other projects, and in collaboration with, e.g., prospective cities to replicate developed solutions. The paper is structured into the background, its application in urban planning, leading towards an analytical framework to enable a better conceptualisation and understanding of potential fields of application and impacts.

2. Background

Before discussing the different implementations of storytelling workshops, not only within the +CityxChange project, but also taking inspiration from other storytelling initiatives, a short overview of the meaning and conceptualisations of storytelling is needed. A particular focus shall be on three elements: First, storytelling has an important role in generating support for a project and translating complex ideas or technologies, which are prevalent in +CityxChange, in a communicable format. Secondly, storytelling does not need, and should not be a linear process which considers the urban community as a silent, receiving audience. Instead and thirdly, storytelling can and should be seen as a strong tool to facilitate citizen engagement and foster co-creation.

2.1 Storytelling narratives and elements

Stories are used across various fields, mostly with the goal to build a narrative which conveys a certain message or builds a common vision. It often follows the principle of the Golden Circle (fig. 1) of *Why, How, and What*, which was developed by Simon Sinek. A story starts in the past and expands into the future, evolving into a shared goal, justification, or vision (Why) for the audience; therefore, generating support for the process and justifying the ways it is implemented (How) and what it results in or what the direct implications and consequences are (What).



Fig. 1: Golden Circle developed by Simon Sinek (Sinek 2011)

Despite its primary application in the marketing and entertainment sector, it can also be facilitated to communicate research findings and evidence into policy actions through narratives and telling stories to grab the attention and speak to the emotions of the audience; in this particular case, policymakers. To achieve this, Davidson highlights the importance of understanding the psychology, group dynamics, and follow the rules of the audience needed (Davidson 2017, p. 2). In an extensive analysis of “grey” literature (non-academic literature, such as reports of organisation, newspaper articles, etc.) about storytelling in the context of impacting policy decisions, Davidson distinguishes five different topics which the majority of studies sources focus on: 1) Individual decision-making; 2) Decision-making process and context; 3) Concepts of “evidence”; 4) Developing a strategy; and 5) Telling effective stories.

Regarding the first two topics of individual decision-making and its process and context, Davidson highlighted the prevalence of storytelling literature building upon findings from a variety of fields, such as behavioural studies and psychology. The three key insights about human-decision making which are mostly referred to are that humans think automatically (fast-thinking), think socially (influenced by social networks, social identities, and social norms), and with the support of mental models (frames, narratives, or world views) (Davidson, p. 2). These are crucial for framing stories and effective storytelling has to take advantage of these. For example, the plot can be used to highlight causal relationships, while enabling the audience to process complex information despite the dominant “fast-thinking.” Further, effective stories position the audience in social constructs and, therefore, influence the social thinking. A frequent approach for this is building a narrative which includes a villain-character and a hero-character. In the context of the +CityxChange project, the “villain” could be a group of people who is polluting the environment and wasting, while the “hero” would be sustainable and active citizen who collaborate and advocate for green technologies and approaches.

Additionally, setting a clear storytelling goal is crucial. This can either be organising (e.g., developing support), advocating (persuasion towards a goal), or educating (make audience understand complex issue). (Davidson 2017, p. 5). Lastly, Davidson lists a few key characteristics: Simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, and emotion (Davidson 2017, p. 6). Simplicity, for example, is crucial when dealing with numbers and complex data. Instead of using the accurate percentages or values, frequencies or comparisons/contrasts should be used to allow the audience to visualise and imagine the implication of data (Davidson 2017, p. 6).

2.2 Storytelling in the field of urban planning

Before telling a story, the integration of the audience in the mobilisation of knowledge is crucial. Referring to the key elements of the +CityxChange of “Co-creating the future we want to live in” as well as international urban development guidelines, effective participation of the community in any kind of project is fundamental for its effect. The New Urban Agenda (United Nations 2016), a document prepared and endorsed through the United Nations General Assembly, states:

We encourage effective participation and collaboration among all relevant stakeholders, [...], in ascertaining the opportunities for urban economic development as well as in identifying and addressing existing and emerging challenges. (United Nations 2016, p. 7-8)

Under this consideration and focusing more on the urban context of the +CityxChange project, this section revolves around the concept and practice of storytelling in the field of urban planning and development. The integration and intra-stakeholder exchange and contribution is in the focus.

The primary academic contributor to the link between storytelling and urban planning is James A. Throgmorton, who first published about this topic in 1996 and revised his initial claims in 2003. He states

that “*planning is constitutive and persuasive storytelling about the future.*” (Throgmorton, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, he does not divide between storytelling as a tool and urban planning as a process but sees them as intrinsically linked. Throgmorton believes that every (good) plan comes along with a story and planners always utilise storytelling, on purpose or not, when presenting their ideas. He further argues that planners’ stories about the future always have to be initiated from a “*contestable normative position*” but their narratives need to be adapted to the diverse local interests, social groups, and spatial perceptions. Consequently, these various narratives have to be juxtaposed to create a new, defamiliarised reality which allows for the development and planning of a new, and progressive future (Throgmorton 2003, p. 31).

Building upon Throgmorton’s work, Merlij van Hulst (2012) expands upon this conceptualisation and argues that storytelling in the broader field of planning can be divided into two subgroups. On the one hand, storytelling can be a model *of planning*, while it can also be a model *for planning*. The latter looks at storytelling to define or develop new approaches of planning through the use of storytelling (Van Hulst 2012, p. 301). In the non-planning research about storytelling, these two types are defined as linear knowledge transfer processes versus cyclical processes of knowledge mobilisation. The first describes a linear process from producers to users, while the latter focuses on reciprocal exchange to foster co-creation. To anticipate the risk of producing stories and convincing people through manipulative techniques is embedding the narrative of stories strongly in a collective and participatory knowledge generation which functions as a basis. This can be achieved by three primary knowledge mobilisation strategies: 1) Transmedia for an exchange across media channels; 2) building bridges between different knowledge groups of the society; and 3) layering to communicate across different levels of detail (Anderson et al. 2015, p. 2).

First, transmedia as a strategy, acknowledges the need to choose the most suitable platform and media to convey or collect information across various audiences and collaborators. The principle of building bridges “recognises that different knowledge mobilisers are separated by epistemological, discursive, and disciplinary divides.” (Anderson et al. 2015, p. 12) Therefore, it is important to use simplifying tools, such as key words, examples, metaphors, objects, and discourses to cater for different needs and profiles of knowledge producers and consumers and lead to collaborative practices across diverse societal groups.

Lastly, layering attempts to adapt the complexity of scientific research to the respective audiences by considering the complexity itself, the length, and technical language. Therefore, the level of detail, adequate complexity and choice of words is crucial for effective layering (Anderson et al. 2015, p. 11).

3. Storytelling Analytical Framework

An analytical framework has been developed for the purpose of this research to understand better different types of stories which can be used to shape knowledge transfer and co-creation between the involved actors. A set of elements which have been extracted from the above-mentioned theories and which have been used during the storytelling workshops of +CityxChange project, will be used in this study to position the empirical research. The framework starts with a ‘Why’, ‘How’ and ‘What’ approach; and tries to give an answer with its respective elements to what can be used for two main storylines: (1) Storytelling *of* planning, and (2) Storytelling *for* planning.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK		Making sense out of the stories we tell by creating an approach based on a theoretical review and empirical research	
1 WHY?	1.1 Narrative	Storytelling of Planning LINEAR PROCESS e.g. municipality informing citizens on the new development/ plans in the area	Storytelling for Planning CYCLICAL PROCESS e.g. co-creating a shared vision with all interested stakeholders
	2.1 Character	Story focuses on external subject or object, which help to convey message.	Story is co-created from (internal/ external) subject perspective or around an object
	2.2 Scene	External place defined by location, setting, time	Central element, possibly co-located with audience/ storyteller
2 HOW?	2.3 Audience/ Storyteller	PASSIVE AUDIENCE Knowledge "producer" → Knowledge "user"	ACTIVE AUDIENCE Knowledge "producer" ↔ ^{co-creation} Knowledge "user"
	2.4 Mobilization strategy	LAYERING → Dependent on the storyteller TRANSMEDIA → Closed System	LAYERING → Less dependent on the storyteller/ Can be negotiated with the audience BRIDGING → Highly present in the co-creation process TRANSMEDIA → Open System
	2.5 Tool/Medium	TOOLS USED TO CONVEY A MESSAGE IN A DIRECT WAY ❶ Video/Animation ❷ Newspaper article ❸ Presentation/talk	CO-PRODUCE THE MESSAGE WITH THE AUDIENCE ❶ Storytelling workshop ❷ Role-play ❸ Fuck-up nights ❹ Placemaking
3 WHAT?	3.1 Outcome/Result	Message, feeling/emotion	Message, feeling/emotion, support, exchange
	3.2 Impact	Feedback, support	Increased empathy, trust, mutual understanding

Fig. 2. Analytical framework for storytelling. Source: Authors.

Narratives. Based on the two different types of storytelling lines that we have chosen, the narrative that the storyteller might want to use, differs. When referring to storytelling of planning, knowledge is transferred from knowledge ‘producers’ to knowledge ‘users’, therefore, the narrative in this case follows an already set up linear process of knowledge transfer. The second one, storytelling for planning, relies more on reciprocal relationships between actors for the co-creation and use of knowledge that is mobilised in intentional processes of social/urban/environmental, economical/etc., change. Despite their differences, a few questions to kickstart the process can be used in both cases:

- What are the narrative elements (plot, theme, characters) of the project?
- What is the timeframe of the story?
- What are the major events or challenges offered by the narrative?
- What are the strategies for expanding the narrative?

Character. Characters, in this setting, may be subjects or objects that the storyteller refers to. The linear process of storytelling refers to characters and objects from an external point of view. They are elements which have already been created by the storyteller or other groups which are not necessarily a reflection of the audience. Therefore, the storyteller is informing the audience around the subject/object which is a central part of the story. On the other hand, storytelling for planning, aims at co-creating these subjects/objects during an interactive process between the storyteller and the audience. When understanding the character that will play a central role in the story, reflecting first upon these questions can help on choosing the storytelling type that is more relevant to the event:

- Are the main characters of the story (subject/object) already there or do they need to be co-produced with the general audience?
- Can the story world be considered a primary character of its own?
- Can the audience be considered a character as well?

Scene. The scene can be both a simple environment with no or little consideration in which the story takes place or the characters operate. However, in the case of storytelling for planning, it is likely that the scene becomes a central element and possibly a subject of the story itself. In most cases, the scene would be the area of planning, as well as the location of the audience and/or storyteller. This enables both more immersive environments as well as allowing for transmedia approaches which interact with the direct, physical surrounding through installations, walking tours, or character play.

Audience/Storyteller. The relationship between the audience and the storyteller differs in the two processes of knowledge transfer. In the first case, the audience has a more passive role, being mainly there to absorb the knowledge that is being produced. Also, such cases do not allow much for a co-creative process, but they aim mainly to let the audience know about the status of the project and what has been done so far. The second one, where knowledge transfer follows a cyclical process, the audience is asked to have a more active role, by contributing to the project as much as the storyteller.

Knowledge mobilisation. This element builds upon Anderson et al. (2015), knowledge mobilisation strategies by introducing three main approaches:

1. Layering – recognises the complexity, length and technical language used by professionals in their specific field and the difficulty that the general public has to work through such terminology barriers. Layering can help to determine the level of details, complexity, and language required to effectively communicate ideas. Within +CityxChange project, due to the high complexity of the technical terminology, we have been developing a project glossary which will be used for more effective communication with the general public.
2. Building bridges – to work across boundaries, it is necessary to employ key words, examples, metaphors, objects and discourse which can bring the audience together, despite the separation that comes due to their differences in epistemological, discursive and disciplinary interests (Anderson et al., 2015). Using bridges can be very beneficial for the co-creation process as it brings individuals together into a more communicative and collaborative space. The place chosen for the event to take place can be used as a bridge. In co-creative process it is important to choose spaces which have a less structured approach and are seen as informal arenas which draw individuals together in dialogues.
3. Transmedia – recognises that various knowledge users/creators will be receptive to ideas presented through different communication forms and media (Scolari, 2009). A transmedia approach involves telling stories across multiple media where, “each medium does what it does best” and engages with a wider diversity of audiences in different ways. The transmedia



approach is important in both types of storytelling. It can be differentiated between open and closed system. Closed systems produce everything from one side, while open system allow or even anticipate for and support contributions from the audience or other bodies to intensify the complexity, level of details, perspectives and, therefore, leading to a more convincing and differentiated story (Gambarato 2013, p. 87). Open systems of transmedia storytelling, therefore, do mostly find use in the application of storytelling for planning instead of storytelling of planning.

Tool/Medium. Tools that are being used to transmit the message in linear processes of knowledge exchange need to be straightforward messages to the audience. The storyteller interacts with the audience in an informative way. Such tools, used to clearly convey a message from the beginning till the end, include presentations, talks, video/animations, etc. On cyclical processes of knowledge exchange tools differ due to the ongoing interaction that exists between the storyteller and the audience where their roles blur and can be taken simultaneously, interchanging, or consecutively.

Outcome/Result. The output or result of the two types overlaps largely. In both cases a message is conveyed, a feeling or emotion created. The central difference is that in the case of storytelling of planning, the message was created prior to the event and just transmitted, while in the second case, the message has been co-created and therefore leads to a higher manifestation within the audience.

Impact. Similar as the outcome, the impacts for both are comparable in the simplest form of increased support, understanding, or information disseminated. However, the second type can further lead to increased empathy for other stakeholders, trust in the project (team), mutual understanding, as well as direct input for the planning process through new ideas, insights, collaboration, or feedback loops.

4. Storytelling as part of +CityxChange

Building upon the theoretical background of storytelling in the context of +CityxChange project of the previous chapter, a delineation between the theoretically possible scope of storytelling and the format and frequency of the workshops is necessary. The anticipated evolvement of the format over the span of the project is largely overlapping with the sections of the background chapter. In the beginning, the workshops primarily focus on the elements and justification of stories which contribute largely to the efforts of WP10 – Communication and Dissemination of the project, later on to WP8 – Replication. At a later stage, the bi-directional character of storytelling as a support tool for fostering collaboration and co-creation will be in a stronger focus, aligned with the objectives of WP9 – Inter-Project Collaboration and Clustering. In particular, Storytelling contributes to learning from successes and challenges from other projects as well as sharing the same experiences from within +CityxChange with other projects and cities undergoing the same process. In the final phase of the project, the current outlook of the storytelling workshop planning suggests a focus on the transmedia storytelling as a tool of sharing the gained experience and knowledge as part of disseminating the project to the public, other projects, and the academic and private sector, as well as guaranteeing local and regional societal and political support. This part goes hand-in-hand with the efforts of WP3 – CommunityxChange and again WP8 – Replication. While all of this requires constant production of story snippets and extensive planning over the course of the project, this falls outside the scope of the workshops. Instead, the workshops shall raise the awareness and sensibility towards the opportunities and potential, as well as providing practical guidelines, approaches and techniques to integrate storytelling in the respective local communication and citizen engagement strategies. The outcomes of the Storytelling workshops are therefore less directly produced materials but instead the project-spanning development of an alternative approach which can be used across a range of fields and tasks in the project and can simultaneously contribute to a variety of the broader objectives of +CityxChange.

Workshop 1: How to use stories to convey messages | Vienna, Austria, April 2019

In the first workshop, two approaches were combined. On the one hand, an overall overview about storytelling was provided to the project consortium, including central elements and best practices. In the second part, a very linear element included local representatives to tell stories on their experiences within Vienna and what challenges were faced. The workshop can be seen as the most linear and introductory where the message was transmitted from the speaker to the audience.

Workshop 2: Enabling citizen-led energy transition | Limerick, Republic of Ireland, October 2019

In the second workshop in one of the two lighthouse cities of the project, Limerick, the topic of the workshop was largely co-produced with the local host city. Therefore, a specific topic – the citizen-led energy transition – was chosen. After a short introduction, three guest speakers were sharing their experiences and learned lessons from three varying perspectives. Starting from the public administration of Utrecht, ideas and challenges in their own initiatives to activate citizens were shared. In the second part, a community representative of Tallaght shared insights on his mediator role between community and external stakeholders. Lastly, an active citizen from Rotterdam shared experience over a ten-year duration on how to transform the energy consumption bottom-up in her neighbourhood. The short input presentation fuelled intensive discussions which led to knowledge exchange and generation. Nevertheless, while the process was more interactive, the storytelling in itself was still primarily linear.

Workshop 3: Telling the stories of places through community engagement events / From conventional planning to placemaking through storytelling | Virtual, October 2020

Stories play an important role in how people assign value to a place since all those stories can give a place an identity. Placemaking approaches focus on strategic interventions in specific places aiming at bringing more value to that place with and for local people. The third illustrative case used for the purpose of this research focuses on Storytelling for Planning using Placemaking as a tool to introduce spaces that are built upon stories and spaces that would further enable future stories of citizen life. In this sense, we see storytelling as an initiator of change and development, by capturing the unique values of the place and community perspectives in order to develop accordingly. On the other hand, using storytelling for placemaking helps to enhance the social connection between people, the users of space, and the physical place itself. Our third Storytelling workshop within the +CityxChange project, focused exactly on how the speaker together with the audience can build stories focusing on a specific spatial element (e.g. Escuela de Aprendices in Sestao, Spain). In this way, focusing on the stories related to the history of that specific area, we aimed at engaging citizens on exploring new potentials for development for the building itself, taking historical timelines as a starting point. Without using jargon from the field, professionals can perceive the needs of the community more easily: where they come from, what they value, and, most importantly, the characteristics of their relationship to the built environment. This approach focuses more on Storytelling for Planning, where the stories are created together with all participants in a cyclical process of giving and taking between the knowledge ‘producer’ and knowledge ‘user’.

5. Conclusion

We believe that storytelling as a planned and facilitated process can contribute to a variety of projects, both research and implementation. The careful choice of the right method and approach, as well as the tools and materials used, are crucial to enable a meaningful exchange. A particular focus should be put on the sufficient time allocated for active exchange as too often the linear knowledge transfer takes up the majority of the time – further highlighting a careful selection of a moderator who ensure equal representation of all participants. Lastly, we see potential to develop the concept of place-centred storytelling further, as well as looking into different combinations of media, to reach the most



representative and inclusive results. Without using jargon from the field, professionals can perceive the needs of the community more easily: where they come from, what they value, and, most importantly, the characteristics of their relationship to the built environment. By doing so, a collective narrative is created which can help to identify and generate cutting-edge ideas and solutions for the communities in focus.

We can argue that urban planning and storytelling are intrinsically linked. However, when delivering a message – may it be in policymaking, in critique, in process, building up a discourse or as a catalyst for change – is important to first understand the way how we want to use the story (e.g. Storytelling of Planning vs Storytelling for Planning). This paper and its approach to the analytical framework, by proposing a set of elements that can be used for either one or the other type of storytelling, aimed at digging more into practical tools to understand the work that stories can do. We can conclude that by using stories as a form of planning, planners can overcome many hurdles in current planning outreach by expanding their set of practical tools, becoming more vigilant and critical toward the needs of communities and opening up to a more diverse political discourse.

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