

Reflections: Book review

The stories that documents tell

ROBERT BEAUREGARD



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In this essay, I extend Lieven Ameel's narrative approach to planning by adding a material perspective that treats planning documents as actors in planning practice. As actors, documents have consequences for planning beyond the stories that they convey. Among others, these consequences include providing the transparency essential for democratic planning, allowing planners to act at a distance, and strengthening institutional memory. I also reflect on the private stories that the public does not hear or read about and which are as important as the stories that Ameel deftly analyzes.

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Robert Beauregard (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8821-7471>), Professor Emeritus, Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, Columbia University, USA. E-mail: rab48@columbia.edu

Before planners tell public stories, they first produce documents. What the public hears and reads is the result of prior consultations and negotiations that have occurred among a variety of actors that included not only planners but elected officials and staff from other agencies. When these deliberations are resolved, the government – utilizing printed plans and reports, press releases, visual displays, and website content – announces what it wants the public to know. Behind the public stories that planners tell is a cloistered world that neither public speech nor planning documents fully acknowledge.¹

Lieven Ameel agrees on the importance of documents – up to a point. As he writes in *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* (2021, 38), his thoughtful reflection on recent planning projects in Helsinki, “[p]lanning is understood here as a form of storytelling and as a rhetorical activity which is performed in the form of texts (such as planning documents) and processes (such as consultations or community meetings).”² Ameel’s scholarly world, though, is that of literature and his acknowledgment of documents is quickly replaced by the narratives that these documents contain. His interest is the extent to which “methodological concepts from literary and narrative studies ... can be applied to planning texts and practices” (*ibid.*, 3). His goal is to clarify the terminological inconsistencies in planning stories and show how “narrative and the material world are part of a firmly intertwined and

interactive network of meaning and experience" (*ibid.*, 2). To this end, he asks: What storylines do Helsinki's planners develop? What metaphors do they deploy? How do stories outside of planning – stories, for example, that journalists might write and residents share amongst themselves – influence planning narratives? For Ameel, what matters is the ideas, not the documents.

Ameel deserves to be praised for his impressive effort to give planners the tools they need to be more disciplined storytellers. Clearly, he wants planners to be better writers and, by implication, those who peruse planning documents to be better readers. To achieve these ends, his advice focuses mainly on content; that is the themes that planners choose to emphasize. Yet, he does not ignore stylistic issues. Consider a few examples. One is the pervasive use of the passive voice and the absence of protagonists. This is a sign of the inherent tentativeness of plans. Plans exist prior to commitments by actors with the resources and authority to realize them. At this moment, the active voice seems inappropriate. Another stylistic trait is the rarity of individual stories, a quality pointing to planners' embrace of an evidence-based rationality and avoidance of what is often termed subjectivity. What matters to planners are categories of people: the creative class, households, shoppers, business owners. That the Helsinki City Planning Department commissioned Hannu Mäkelä to write a literary novel (*Hyvä jätkä*) that could be distributed to residents of the new Jätkäsaari neighborhood could not be a clearer statement regarding planners' aversion to engage with individual lives. Traditional planning documents are not meant to acknowledge personal stories. As a last example, planning texts, like almost all bureaucratic documents, are highly stylized. Standardized and generic, to use Ameel's (2021, 72, endnote 4) terms, they leave little room for creativity. A critical reader might speculate on whether this stifles innovation not just in how planning stories are written and told, but also in the thinking that precedes them.

Much more could be said about the style of planning texts: their avoidance of ambiguity and conflict, their stealth retreat from evidence as they make promises about the future, and the need for closure in the face of unrelenting change come readily to mind. My interest, though, is the extent to which planning stories and planning itself depend on the material presence of documents. Planning practice has a materiality that cannot be ignored: planners do not act alone or only with other people. They also act with things from laptop computers to telephones to conference tables (Beauregard 2015). "[M]aps, photographs, diagrams, charts, paperwork, templates, lists, cards, and books ... [are] ... ubiquitous instrument[s] of building, planning, and urban governance practices" (Lee & Weiss 2020, 240). The documents with which planners work do more than serve as media for conveying stories; they are vibrant matter with consequences independent of their message (Bennett 2010). As physical objects, documents, moreover, have non-narrative implications.

In considering these extra-narrative effects, it is useful to think of documents as immutable mobiles, a term associated with both actor-network theory and science and technology studies (Schmidgen 2015, 91–92; Pontille 2020). Immutable mobiles are reports, graphs, images, statistical tables, and other inscriptions that circulate from one person to another and one place to another without their content being changed. For example, when scholars circulate a draft paper to colleagues for review, whether in physical or electronic form, all of them read the same text. The paper moves around and the content remains fixed. Planning documents are similarly immutable as regards content and mobile as regards materiality. These qualities are central to a document's non-narrative effects. Four such consequences deserve brief mention: the transparency essential for democratic planning, the legitimacy afforded planners, the political support for planning proposals, and institutional memory, all of which enhance the ability of planners to do their work.³

First, consider transparency. Simply by stabilizing their ideas in documents that circulate, planners ensure that planning not only is done, but is *seen* to be done. What is being proposed is fixed and knowable. This allows the public to gauge whether the planners are behaving properly or whether they need to be held accountable. Transparency re-balances "the natural asymmetry of information between those who govern and those whom they are supposed to serve" (Stiglitz 2002, 27). Such widely-shared knowledge is critical to a democratic planning. Without documents that anchor planning stories, accountability is diminished.

Second, documents publicly attest to the expertise and the insightfulness of planners. They portray an image of reasonable, government employees who think about the health of the city and the welfare

of its inhabitants. Documents enable planners to be seen as legitimate commentators on important urban issues and as experts whose advice deserves serious consideration. They are also a sign of planners' professionalism. In their absence, planners would be just people with opinions.

The circulation of documents is important for gathering and solidifying support for planning initiatives. Making planning documents immutable does not alone make planners more powerful (contra Pontille 2020, 103) – the documents also have to circulate. Being passed from hand to hand increases the potential for planners to be effective and influential. One of the ways this happens is by enabling planners to act at a distance. Planners cannot be everywhere in person, but, by using written reports and websites, they can project their ideas over time and space and to different groups of people. Embodied in documents, their thoughts and proposals are present even when they are absent. Another way that documents extend planners' influence is when they are read by people who discover a correspondence between their interests and those of the planners. A connection is made and now planners have expanded their network of supporters. Of course, planners cannot control how people react to their stories or to the documents that circulate. Documents can engender protest and resistance as well as support and praise.

The circulation of planning documents, third, raises an issue on which Ameel is relatively silent. Who hears these planning stories? Who reads these documents? Who is the actual – rather than the intended – audience? Planning stories are important only to the extent that people learn about them. A planning story is not only to be told, it also needs to be widely heard and read by the appropriate individuals and publics. However, we know very little about how far these stories are disseminated. Additionally, stories are likely to be experienced differently depending on the media being used and the settings in which they are promulgated. As regards the former, it matters whether the stories are on a web site or visually displayed in a public space. As regards the latter, context matters. In New York City, the government has a formal and extensive public review process for public projects (e.g., the re-design of a park) and for private sector developments that do not conform to current zoning. Concerned residents not only have these projects explained to them at public meetings, they can also access the supporting documents (such as environmental impact assessments) on the Department of City Planning's web site. Moreover, the city has a vast array of neighborhood associations and advocacy groups actively involved in holding the Department of City Planning accountable (Beauregard 2022, forthcoming). Helsinki is a much dissimilar political environment and this suggests that who learns about these stories and the responses that are engendered will be different from what might have occurred in New York City.

Lastly, documents contribute to institutional memory. When planners consider an issue, they rarely do so *de novo*. Rather, like many professionals, planners draw on past experience and the 'best practices' that circulate through the planning world. Having documentation enables them to remember how previous proposals had fared and allows new personnel to become familiar with what has been done and how the planning department thinks. Planning documents provide continuity. Moreover, ideas that were earlier rejected might, under changed political circumstances and new developmental conditions, attract sufficient support to be adopted and implemented. In this and other ways, documents perform functions beyond simply telling planning stories.

In conclusion, I want to return to an issue I raised at the start. It is not just that before planners tell public stories, they produce documents. Rather, before they produce documents they engage in storytelling to which the public is not invited. Unlike the stories that become public, these stories are told in seclusion and are more likely to be tentative, exploratory, and tangled as well as thematically richer with more possibilities in play. Planners are speaking freely in order to work their way to an understanding of the project. Additionally, ideas are likely to be more attributable than they are in public stories. Without advocates, ideas die. Consequently, people and groups are actively taking positions so that their interests are recognized and hopefully adopted. Once a single story is agreed-upon, once all of these private stories are reconciled, the sources of those ideas are erased and human actors disappear. It is important that planners be able to tell these stories beyond the gaze of the public; they need safe spaces to think and negotiate. But, should not these stories also be subject to reflection and analysis? Such stories precede those that Ameel finds so enticing; they are the material out of which public planning stories are crafted.

Ameel has written a book that makes a strong case for paying greater attention to the stories that planners tell in public. In addition, he provides a useful framework for understanding how such stories work and how they should be read. However, these are not the only stories in which planners are involved. Behind what the public is told is an even richer narrative world. As importantly, public stories only exist in the form they do because of the documents that preceded them.

Notes

¹ A theoretical concern with the documents of planning, though uncommon, is not new. For an introduction, see Hull (2012) and Beauregard (2022). An important source for this approach is Latour and Woolgar's (1986 [1976]) *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. For a popular perspective by a book historian that distinguishes between the text (content) and the medium (the physical book), see Price (2019).

² Ameel, here, seems to equate texts and documents. Contrarily, I treat texts as content and documents as the media that disseminate text. In English, the word 'textbook' nicely captures this distinction.

³ In doing so, I do not distinguish among the effects of different types of documents. Ameel proceeds in a similar fashion. Like most writers of case studies, he treats all of his documentary sources as having equal value and effects (Ameel 2021, 13).

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