

## Reflections: Book review

# Narratives of and in urban change and planning: whose narratives and how authentic?

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Lieven Ameel's book *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* offers a critical examination of the role of narratives and story-telling in questions concerning urban planning in future deliberations of urban change. The discussion provides an excellent way to identify, define and construct our understanding about narratives in and of planning, including the construction of a typology for the first time. But narratives of and for planning tend to mask wider meta-narrative issues that will affect how places are shaped and are changed in the future. These drivers of change not only encompass a range of socio-economic and environmental challenges. They will also have profound implications for our use of technology, and for the way our democratic processes operate. Such dramatic changes will impact on the context and form of planning, wherever you are in the world. And we are likely to see greater polarisation in attitudes toward urban and regional change, some of which may not only be proactive, but deeply reactive, subjective and selective. If the narrative turn will become more prominent in planning, we need to be ready for the likely proliferation of disruptive and insurgent narratives that will emerge and reflect the deep-seated vested interests that possess stakes in how and whether places change on their terms.

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"The city does not see things, but images of things that mean other things". Italo Calvino's (1974, 13) *Invisible Cities* has always served as a perennial reminder, to those with the audacity to think they can plan and reshape urban areas, that how the city is seen and thought of by others matters a great deal. Cities are in a constant state of flux, constantly building and rebuilding, through successive waves of clearance, development, investment, and decline.

They can rise up spectacularly quickly thanks to massive amounts of economic growth, as we have seen in such diverse places as Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur, Berlin and London. Or they can crash just as quickly thanks to economic decline, as in Detroit, the rust belt regions of North America, and deindustrialised parts of northern England.

Lieven Ameel's (2021) book *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* starts to unpick urban change as they are told through narratives and stories, and advocates for their use and acceptance within and for planning for cities. Taking examples from Helsinki's waterfront developments, he makes a good case for us to start to think of urban change in a broader perspective; not as the product of some long-winded legalistic real estate set of negotiations or the eventual outcome of long-term blueprint planning, but rather as a suite of narratives that shape attitudes, behaviour and decisions about urban change in quite profound ways. The book offers a rich seam of discussion that dissects what narratives in and of planning might mean. But it also has provided thought-provocations about how narratives are expected to fit into planning, on whose terms, and in what context, during an era where wider climatic and political processes are unfolding at a rapid pace.

### **From meta-narratives to micro change**

Narratives can certainly tell us a great deal about meta-events such as economic growth and decline. Equally, the impact on humans of catastrophic events can lead to dramatic changes to places and their inhabitants in short amounts of time. The devastating events we have seen all too readily unfold in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and more recently in Ukraine with cities such as Mariupol, amount to the complete erasure of the urban fabric, of homes, businesses, and essential services. The bombing out of communities not only truly wipes the slate clean for the aggressor, it causes a massive humanitarian effort to be undertaken and the mass migration of maybe hundreds of thousands of people to safe havens. That, in turn, changes the shape, content and look of cities perhaps thousands of miles away from conflict zones.

The same patterns of events are being seen in the context of climate change around the world, as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, droughts and water shortages combine to form perfect storms and have life-changing impacts on people living in these places. These drivers of change continue to affect land, habitation, where and how we build, the essential natural resources and infrastructure we rely on, and our ability to thrive. And they, too, can cause human migratory patterns from affected areas to safer and certainly more prosperous locations.

In each of these cases, there are stories to be told about how such circumstances came about. And such stories fit with particular narratives about general climatic patterns prevalent, from the success or failure of government policies in the management of these places, in the preferences of global investors and ease or difficulty of flows of trade, in the provision or lack of infrastructure spending, and in sudden catastrophic events.

Both history and contemporary circumstances show us that not only do meta-events cause ebbs and flows in the fortune and shape of cities, wherever you are in the world, they can also have differential impacts over time and space, can be read in different ways by those that have experienced or even have played a part in precipitating events, and those watching from some distance, both contemporaneously and with the benefit of hindsight.

For those of us interested in observing and analysing urban change, narratives – and the stories within them – play a significant role in our understanding of events. For the most part, they are partial or selective constructs, told from particular vantage points. They can – with hindsight – shine a greater and perhaps unfair light on people and places, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes quite deliberately. This is in order to skew the narrative in a particular direction, or to nullify consequential roles or effects, or even to obfuscate pivotal moments in time.

Narratives are not new constructs within planning, and the book offers us a useful typology of narratives for us to consider. One type of narrative that has been featured within planning, scenarios, have been employed across nations and cities over many decades to help us think about alternative futures and make political choices (Dixon & Tewdwr-Jones 2021). By focusing on long-term futures, scenarios can be a popular way to set out alternative options for places and generate reactions to those options, leading to discussion and trade-offs about desirable or undesirable courses of action.

But narratives can also be employed at the micro scale too. Flyvbjerg's (1998) groundbreaking book *Rationality and Power* is a dramatic work that unearths the politics, presentation and choices about, ostensibly, the planning and building of a new bus station in Aalborg. In global terms, such a development

may seem relatively inconsequential. But on a local or regional scale, even one type of development can provoke a ferocious public reaction, generate heated political debate, and address much more strategic choices about how we live and work in future than one development site in the middle of a city. All this contention points to the use, deployment and argumentation of narratives of the city, narratives within planning, and the relationship between particular narratives and past, present and future stories.

### **Narratives within contentious decision making**

The fact that governments, developers, professionals and even citizens can all have and retell different stories to represent the same event in the same place at the same time illustrates the high contestation associated with urban change and also our inner values. But it also reveals an important dimension often lost in academic accounts of urban planning. As James Throgmorton (1996) has reminded us in his book, *Planning as Persuasive Storytelling*, planning can be a process of rhetorical construction of urban change; it is both a discipline and a professional practice that rests on judgement, evidence, increasingly-scientific intelligence, politics, but also – crucially – human behaviour and perceptions. Even if a person is not directly affected by plans for part of a city, or on a proposal for a specific plot of land, everyone can possess an opinion about those plans or that proposal. And, in most advanced democracies, everyone is also given the right to express those opinions.

With so much contention surrounding how we navigate change in places, depending on one's viewpoint, agenda and perspective, it is worth noting that planning is, nor can ever be, a completely scientific endeavour; nor is it an entirely rational process. It is always easy to rationalise a decision about change after it is occurred. The planning decision is entirely the hostage of argument, debate, negotiation, compromise, and consensus; and, even then, a particular outcome may not be universally appreciated or accepted by those advocating a completely different result after a decision has been made.

One of the more popular forms of narratives about planning in recent years have been stories of the unbuilt: why cities have not changed in the way planners had advocated, or had not been built in line with the visionary ambitious masterplans devised many years previously (Beanland 2021). History is littered with these examples, from Wren's unrealised plans for a rebuilt City of London after the Great Fire of 1666, to the 1946 Bruce Plan for Glasgow. The public have become as much fascinated by planning failures as planning achievements, particularly if the resultant physical and architectural forms would have led to completely different cities to experience. This may be the stuff of whim, mixed with nostalgia for a long vanished past that never was. But it also suggests something deeper occurring within spatial imaginaries (Watkins 2015) about how urban change occurs, who has responsibility for change, why things do not always work out in the ways intended, and whether the final built result is better or worse than what had been there previously. And, critically, citizens are interested in all of these issues, even the aspects of urban change that cannot be seen or never occurred.

This reaction may be peculiar to planning, correspond to emotional attitudes towards planning, and see planning as the agency of change that in no small measures creates cities as palimpsests of urban form and style. But it also suggests that the way narratives are formed about urban change are not simply the construct of planning systems or the consequence of conscious decisions made by professional planners to initiate discussion about narratives of change. We also know that planning does not normally result in a linear pathway of change, but rather meanders according to opportunity and constraint by and between actors, over time, during which time alternative, overlapping and contradictory narratives may emerge.

All this navel-gazing about the art and science of planning decision making may sound, at best, a bit too metaphysical and, at worse, a throwback to 1960s-styles of rational planning debates. But such elements lie at the heart, or beneath the veneer, of urban planning. They shape narratives of planning and urban change, and also lead to contentious and agonistic dilemmas for those charged with making decisions. It is certainly true that professionals have always had to wrestle with ethical dilemmas about different courses and consequences of planning choices, dilemmas between personal views and professional judgement or employers' practices (Marcuse 1976). There has been a perennial debate within the planning discipline about values in planning, and which causes are supported to justify particular planning pathways. This has especially occurred through questions concerning urban

welfarism and social justice (Scott & Roweis 1977), especially if planning outcomes continue to favour wealthier members of society, or directly or indirectly disadvantage those most in need. And the more planning stays rooted, legally, in questions about land, development and property, one could be forgiven for thinking that the activity remains very much tilted in favour of pro-development – and therefore wealthy and powerful – interests.

The more urban societies witness extreme polarisation in cities socially, economically, environmentally and technologically, the more planning will either be looked at to respond on ethical grounds, to address such marked differentials. Or the greater likelihood that it will be revealed as a tool of the wealthy minority with vested interests in advancing change. The point here is that narratives will be central to those debates and employed by critics and societies to challenge, reveal and question not only the purpose of urban change and the role of urban planning, but also the impacts they cause unevenly to society and places. All of this means that narratives of urban planning are not, and should not be, only the preserve of the planning elite, but are much more profound when they are set within wider debates about the future of democracy and the state of politics.

### **Escalating planning narratives through digitisation and social media**

Ameel's (2021) book examines the role of narratives in some of these debates quite skilfully, but is largely quiet on these wider democratic and polarising issues, issues which cannot be separated from narratives of place shaping, planning, and urban growth and decline. And those narratives of global and national shifts, of the ebbs and flows in spatial configurations, and of political struggles, shape the ability of local actors to plan their own places in ways they may desire. To take just one illustration of these wider drivers of change – technology – that has profound implications of not only how the problems of places may be analysed and could be managed, but also adds a significant means on the ability for everyone to create and disseminate their own narratives about urban change, way beyond the control of planners (Batty 2018). We live in an era when social media plays a dominant and perhaps overwhelming role in all our lives. It is a time when citizens and other interested parties are much more likely to express opinions, tell stories, and advance causes digitally rather than through traditional non-digital planning and democratic modes associated with elected government (Wilson & Tewdwr-Jones, 2022). We have also witnessed how social media platforms can play a pivotal role in jolting people, rapidly, into mass movement, whether that's in relation to the Black Lives Matter campaign, Extinction Rebellion climate change protests, or even attempts by Make America Great Again to overthrow democratic election results.

Narratives may be used in reactive ways, as well as proactively. It will come as little surprise to learn that social media is now also being used within planning debates by all sides through which to tell stories about urban change, and those stories are set within particular frames that define an author's preferred narrative. The stories may change, may be over-emphasised for effect, employ hyperbole, intend first and foremost to agitate or provoke, or are even used to challenge other stories and consensus around existing narratives. But there is also the possibility for set narratives to be undermined, or presently falsely. We are too familiar with the notion of fake news, widely promulgated Trumpian-like both before and during the US Presidential election in 2020. Platforming narratives through social media that do not fit a particular ideology must be seen as a deliberate provocation and an attempt to disrupt the status quo, even if those narratives are factually inaccurate. Planning is not immune from this pattern of reaction.

When there is so much contention with urban change, not only are we witnessing – for the most part, through digital forms – the increasing proliferation of multiple narratives of the same future event or development, but also a desire on the part of some advocates to demolish the narrative. Evidence of these type of reactions are only starting to emerge in planning debates at the present time, but one can foresee their possible escalation in the future if planning is required to address certain agendas over others. That may mean, for example, at a meta level, addressing climate change emergencies over economic growth, or health and wellbeing issues rather than car dependency, or prioritising housing for migrants, to name but three issues – issues that have significant localised and planning implications and which cause emotive reactions. Different sides in these debates have long

used their own tactics to present their cases, employ their own evidence bases, and make strident attempts to win their arguments. But social media now enables those sides to accelerate both the means of their narratives and their questioning of opposing sides, and escalate their ideological stances. It is difficult to find any middle grounds here, and a space for compromise, because the stances are so deeply entrenched. And that may mean proponents are prepared to employ a battery of rhetorical devices and falsehoods to gain advantage in these debates, while encouraging possibly tens of thousands of others to side with their argument.

At a micro level, we have already seen a tendency on the part of some developers and their architects to portray visual impressions of prospective new developments as something that may often be seen to be too glossy and attractive to be true. Resultant developments may not be as tree-lined or green as was first showcased. The design of the buildings may not be as attractive as was first illustrated, if the developer reduces the design quality for cost saving purposes at some later date. The density and scale of a development may be more intense than had been shown to the public in an artist's impression. All of which leads to the question whether this skewed portrayal of future urban change is a deliberate move on the part of some in the built environment to obfuscate the narrative and play down likely citizen concerns. More recently, advanced visualisation and graphic techniques are beginning to be harnessed both by local government and by active insurgent civil societies (Miraftab 2009), in an attempt to get an accurate picture of possible urban change or challenge those in positions of power.

This, in itself, is an interesting paradox. For all the moves towards the smart city and the Internet of Things, where the life and management of urban change can be analysed digitally, systemised, and visualised almost instantaneously, so too are we witnessing heightened interest and awareness on the public's part of the processes of urban change, and the consequence of unbridled development, with a greater desire to not only become more involved with decision making, but to shape and control the narratives too.

### **Planning narratives and the need for authenticity**

When you relate all this to the use of narratives in planning, or consider narratives *of* planning, it becomes evident that extending the possibilities of narratives for better planning could well be accompanied by associated questions of accuracy, trust, legitimacy, and authenticity. It is this aspect of the Ameel's book that could be developed further by researchers in future. Narratives are not only there to serve the office of the planner or the planning authority, or assist in some eventual and inevitable pathway to development. Narratives can be employed by anyone with an opinion about place-change. And whereas traditional planning consultation may have planner-defined legal and procedural parameters within which facts, rather than emotions, are considered and addressed, narratives told and repeated through social media platforms cannot be subject to procedural and institutional boundaries.

By all means let us open up conversations about the city. Employ methods and tactics for a larger constituency of interests to get involved directly in shaping their own places. Find innovative ways to include and motivate so-called hard to reach and the voice/less groups in planning and democracy. But we must be prepared for interested parties to use whatever means they can to try to skew the debates and outcomes to their pre-existing beneficial agendas. And this begs some final questions: will planners have to pass judgement in assessing the relevance and legitimacy of different narratives promoted by different vested interests on the same set of issues? What skills sets will be needed by which different narratives and their stories are arbitrated, if those narratives are going to play a more prominent role in deciding cities' future courses of action? And, more pertinently, are planners really the right people to perform such a role?

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