

Reflections: Author's response to book review

New directions for narrative approaches to urban planning

LIEVEN AMEEL



Ameel, L. (2021) New directions for narrative approaches to urban planning. *Fennia* 199(2) 291–293. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.117123>

This reflection reacts to Mark Tewdwr-Jones's and Robert Beauregard's reviews of my book *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning*. It considers the suggestions made by Tewdwr-Jones and Beauregard, and examines new directions for narrative approaches to urban planning.

Keywords: narrative planning, narrative, storytelling, urban planning, narrative turn, city

Lieven Ameel (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8072-4970>), *Literary Studies*, Kanslerinrinne 133014, Tampere University, Finland. E-mail: lieven.ameel@tuni.fi

Urban planning is fundamentally concerned with storytelling. This is not merely a matter of communication or embellishment – rather, forms of narrative are involved in all stages of planning, from survey to participation, from drafting documents to the interaction between the eventually built environment and new personal or communal narratives of lived place. In my book *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning: Plotting the Helsinki Waterfront* (Ameel 2020), I proposed a number of key concepts for analyzing planning narratives, as well as methods for developing planning practices that take into account narrative features. Such concepts and methods included three types of narratives in the context of planning (narratives *for*, *in*, and *of* planning), a focus on metaphor, genre, and plot, and the integration of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching and practicing urban planning.

Robert Beauregard's (2021) and Mark Tewdwr-Jones's (2021) reviews of *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* show that both scholars share with my book a keen interest in narrative planning, as well as the conviction that forms of storytelling are inherent to urban planning in and of itself. Both thinkers have engaged with narrative and planning for years, with notable book-length studies including Beauregard's *Planning Matter* (2015), Tewdwr-Jones's *Urban Reflections: Narratives of Place, Planning and Change* (2011) and the more recent *Urban Futures: Planning for City Foresight and City Visions* (2021; co-authored by Tewdwr-Jones with Dixon). My own background is in literary studies and narrative theory and – perhaps inevitably – the focus of my work has tended to be on written texts and on applying concepts from narrative theory, such as emplotment, metaphor, or genre conventions. In their reviews of *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning*, Tewdwr-Jones and Beauregard point to further directions for developing the study of urban planning narratives. First, they foreground the importance of narrative discourses that take shape in the “cloistered world that neither public speech nor planning

documents fully acknowledge" (Beauregard 2021, 281); second, they are interested in the material aspects of planning practices, as they take shape in increasingly digitalized environments. In what follows, I will briefly respond to these two important suggestions. Beauregard (2021, 283) makes an important point when he foregrounds planning practices that involve "storytelling to which the public is not invited". While Beauregard argues that such narratives deserve more attention, I would say that such forms of storytelling are already studied widely, often with the help of interviews with planners; in the context of Helsinki planning, examples of such studies are the book *Sanat kivettyvät kaupungiksi* (2000) or Othengrafen's *Uncovering the Unconscious Dimensions of Planning* (2012). What remains relatively understudied, however, is how metaphors and plotlines move from one context to another, from the planners' "cloistered world" to finalized planning documents and then onward to the lived experience of city dwellers. The three-fold taxonomy of narratives in the context of planning developed in *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* (Ameel 2020, 28–37) may provide a useful tool for examining such transfers, and also for studying "how far these stories are disseminated" (Beauregard 2021, 283), one aspect that, again following Beauregard, warrants closer scrutiny. While there are recurring arguments for an "open" approach to planning narratives (see Ameel 2020, 118–119), Beauregard (2021, 283) has a more cautious position, noting that "[i]t is important that planners be able to tell these stories beyond the gaze of the public; they need safe spaces to think and negotiate." Of course, such a position will depend on whether we see the planner as working independently from the public, or as collaborative or deliberative storyteller working alongside with present and future urban dwellers.

Beauregard rightly draws attention to the materiality of planning practices, which involves everything "from laptop computers to telephones to conference tables" (*ibid.*, 282), and which also includes "the material presence of documents" (*ibid.*, 282). More needs to be done to examine the ways in which such materiality shapes planning narratives. Similarly, new technological and electronic instruments available to planners and stakeholders are important in shaping forms of narrative. In my book (Ameel 2020, 113–115), I tentatively pointed out some of the possibilities for developing narrative-oriented PPGIS (participatory planning geographic information systems); future research will have to do more to examine technological innovations in planning and planning consultation, and – following Tewdwr-Jones's review – their implications for "how the problems of places may be analysed and could be managed", as well as for "the ability for everyone to create and disseminate their own narratives about urban change" (Tewdwr-Jones 2021, 288).

Tewdwr-Jones (2021, 286) asserts that 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." Moreover, "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." (*ibid.*, 288). It is clear, then, that when studying, reading, and developing planning practices, an awareness of narrative will be crucial. Such an awareness of the role of storytelling in planning – a narrative "literacy", so to speak – would be helpful also for stakeholders and citizens as a way to enable them to let their voice be incorporated within narratives *in* planning. Tewdwr-Jones ends his review to *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* with questions about the skills available to planners for "assessing the relevance and legitimacy of different narratives" (*ibid.*, 289) and for arbitrating between different narratives. This echoes earlier calls by scholars such as Healey, who argued that the key "challenge for planners is to reconstruct their own ways of thinking and acting to provide creative resources for critiquing and facilitating ... [the] work of city story-writing" (Healey 2000, 527–528). To raise to this challenge, it will be necessary for some degree of narrative theory to find a place in urban planning teaching (see Ameel 2020, 120–121). And in actual planning projects, instead of teams that rely too heavily on one or two disciplines (such as engineering or architecture), multidisciplinary teams should be preferred (combining diverse fields including geography, literature, media studies or anthropology). When it comes to teaching planning as well as to developing planning practices, I hope my book *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning* will offer hands-on examples, theoretical concepts, and thoughts for new avenues for study. With their focus on narratives developed by planners in their "cloistered world", and on the materiality of planning practices, the reviews by Mark Tewdwr-Jones and Robert Beauregard point to important new directions for the narrative turn in urban planning.

References

- Ameel, L. (2020) *The Narrative Turn in Urban Planning. Plotting the Helsinki Waterfront*. Routledge, London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003094173>
- Beauregard, R. (2015) *Planning Matter. Acting with Things*. Chicago University Press, Chicago. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226297422.001.0001>
- Beauregard, R. (2021) The stories that documents tell. *Fennia* 199(2) 281–284. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.115188>
- Dixon, T. J. & Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2021) *Urban Futures: Planning for City Foresight and City Visions*. Policy Press, Bristol. <https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447330936.001.0001>
- Healey, P. (2000) Planning in Relational Space and Time: Responding to New Urban Realities. In Bridge, G. & Watson, S. (eds.) *A Companion to the City*, 517–530. Blackwell, Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470693414.ch43>
- Mäenpää, P., Aniluoto A., Manninen, R. & Villanne, S. (2000) *Sanat kivettyvät kaupungiksi*. Yhdyskuntasuunnittelun tutkimus- ja koulutuskeskuksen julkaisuja, Espoo.
- Othengrafen, F. (2012) *Uncovering the Unconscious Dimensions of Planning: Using Culture as a Tool to Analyse Spatial Planning Practices*. Routledge, London.
- Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2011) *Urban Reflections: Narratives of Place, Planning and Change*. Policy Press, Bristol. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t899b7>
- Tewdwr-Jones, M. (2021) Narratives of and in urban change and planning: whose narratives and how authentic? *Fennia* 199(2) 285–290. <https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.115636>