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Towards a Critical Narrative Turn in Urban Planning

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Abstract

eee “aarraiee ””””” eeeess ooa aaaammm shift in planning theory and practice that emphasizes the importance of storytelling and narratives in understanding and shaping urban and regional development. This approach gained prominence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries as planners and scholars recognized the limitations of traditional, technocratic planning methods. Instead, they explored how narratives shape the perceptions, actions, and outcomes of planning processes. While the narrative turn has opened new avenues for more inclusive and reflective planning practices, it has faced significant challenges and critiques. This research aims to explore these challenges and critiques in depth and propose a critical narrative approach as a way to modify existing narrative turn in planning.

Key Words: Urban Planning, Narratives, Critical Narrative Turn

Introduction

The narrative turn in planning emerged in the late 20th century, influenced by broader trends in social sciences and humanities that emphasized the importance of language, discourse, and narrative in shaping human experience. Influenced by postmodernism, constructivism, and interpretive approaches, scholars began to challenge the positivist and rationalist assumptions that had long dominated planning theory and practice. Key figures such as Michel Foucault (e.g., 1982) and Jürgen Habermas (e.g., 1970, 1984) played crucial roles in highlighting how power, knowledge, and discourse shape social realities. In the context of planning, the narrative turn involves recognizing that planning is not just a technical process of problem-solving but also a discursive activity where stories, meanings, and interpretations play a crucial role. Sandercock (2003) emphasized the importance of acknowledging multiple voices and stories in planning to create more democratic and inclusive cities. Similarly, Throgmorton (1996) argued that planners are not just technicians but also storytellers who use narratives to persuade and mobilize action.

Narratives are seen as a form of knowledge that captures the complexity of human experiences and social processes. Unlike technical or scientific knowledge, narrative knowledge is subjective, contextual, and pluralistic. The narrative turn emphasizes the role of storytelling in planning. Planners use stories to communicate visions, justify decisions, and mobilize support. Storytelling can also be a tool for marginalized groups to assert their perspectives and challenge dominant narratives. Narratives are structured accounts of events and experiences that convey meaning. In planning, they can take the form of

official plans, policy documents, media stories, or community testimonies (Discourses refer to the broader frameworks of meaning and knowledge within which narratives are situated. They shape how problems are defined, what solutions are considered legitimate, and whose voices are heard). The narrative turn aligns with interpretive and participatory approaches to planning. It advocates for engaging with diverse stakeholders, understanding their stories, and incorporating their perspectives into planning processes. Emphasis is placed on the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, particularly those of marginalized and disenfranchised groups, in the planning process, and narrative methodologies involve collecting, interpreting, and utilizing stories from diverse urban actors to inform planning processes. By incorporating narratives, planners can engage more effectively with communities, ensuring that diverse voices and perspectives are represented in planning decisions.

Narrative Theory Articulation Time Periods

The articulation and evolution of the Narrative turn in Planning could be classified into three periods

Early Development (1970-1990)

The narrative turn began to take shape in the 1970s-1990s, influenced by postmodern and communicative planning theories. The narrative approach draws from diverse theoretical foundations, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, and literary theory. Theorists like Guy Debord (1977), Paul Ricoeur (1988), and Michel de Certeau (1984), have influenced

this perspective, arguing that human experiences and actions are inherently narrative. Ricoeur's notion of "narrative identity" posits that individuals and communities construct their identities

through stories, which in turn shape their understanding of place and space. In the context of planning, Bernardo Secchi (1984) in his seminal work called "Urban Pppppppp ggrraiiee", addresses the attention of planners to the production of myths, turning the planning practice that often seen as a technical practice into one centered on the production of images and ideas (Mager and Matthey, 2015).

Maturation and Expansion (Late 1990s-2010)

During the 2000s and 2010s, the narrative turn gained momentum, with more scholars creating arguments about planning as storytelling and the role of different narratives in the planning process, and practitioners adopting narrative methodologies. Key proponents, such as Sandercock (2003) and James Throgmorton (1996, 2007), argued that planning should not only be about technical solutions but also about understanding and shaping the stories that people tell about their cities and communities. This period saw the development of various narrative tools and techniques, such as storytelling workshops, narrative mapping, and participatory narrative inquiry.

Contemporary Developments (2010-Present)

In recent years, the narrative turn has continued to evolve, with growing interest in its potential to address complex urban challenges. Contemporary developments include the integration of digital storytelling and narratives in climate change adaptation and resilience planning. In this period, Lieven Ameel, a leading scholar in this research area, has extensively explored the intersections of narrative theory and planning. Ameel (2014, 2016a) argues that by understanding the stories that people talk about their cities, planners can gain insights into the values, identities, and aspirations of different communities, leading to more reflective and context-sensitive planning. He has conducted case studies in various cities, analyzing how narratives shape urban policies and practices. For example, his research on Helsinki (Ameel, 2019) explores how narratives of modernity and tradition influence the city's development.

Different Types of Narratives in Urban Planning

Ameel (2019) formulated a narrative typology: Narratives for, in, and of planning.

Narratives For Planning

Narratives for planning refer to the use of stories to articulate visions, goals, and strategies for urban development. These narratives can inspire action, guide decision-making, and foster a sense of shared purpose among stakeholders. Urban theorists have progressively recognized the narratives created by citizens about specific locations and environments as significant experiential data. Understanding the local stories in a community is explicitly regarded as advantageous for fostering a more inclusive, democratic, and sustainable urban environment (Ibid, 322-323).

The primary goal of narratives for planning is to build support and legitimacy for planning initiatives. They are often employed to align various objectives. So, they are **Purpose-driven**. These narratives typically describe a desired future state or vision. They outline the benefits of achieving this vision and the consequences of inaction, so, they are **future-oriented**. Visionary narratives are potent tools in planning, providing compelling images of the future. They can inspire stakeholders to rally around a common goal and align their efforts towards achieving it.

Narratives In Planning

Narratives in planning refer to the stories and discourses that emerge within the planning process itself. These narratives are more process-oriented and descriptive, capturing the ongoing dialogues, conflicts, and negotiations among stakeholders. In this context, narratives in planning refer to the narrative activities and documentation generated and selected by a planning department concerning a specific

planning initiative or project (see Van Hulst, 2012). Planning documents, including master plans and strategic frameworks, serve not merely as technical reports but as narratives that convey a vision for the future. These documents organize the narrative by identifying problems, proposing interventions, and outlining expected outcomes. Additionally, they embody the values, priorities, and assumptions of both planners and stakeholders. The processes of community engagement frequently involve gathering and incorporating narratives from a variety of stakeholders. Participatory planning acknowledges that communities possess significant knowledge and experiences that can contribute to more inclusive and responsive planning efforts. To be persuasive, these narratives often **simplify** complex issues and **emphasize** certain aspects over others. They may downplay potential negative impacts or challenges to focus on the positive outcomes.

Narratives of Planning

Narratives of planning explore how planning practices and processes are represented and understood. This is usually an ex-post understanding, or even assessment and analysis. These narratives can be found in media representations, academic discourses, and public perceptions of planning. Media plays a crucial role in shaping public narratives about planning. News articles, documentaries, and social media posts can influence how planning efforts are perceived, either positively or negatively. For example, media coverage of urban renewal projects often highlights the tensions between development and displacement. Scholarly research contributes to the narratives of planning by critically analyzing planning practices and their impacts. In addition, public perceptions of planning are influenced by myths and narratives about urban development. These perceptions can affect trust in planning authorities and willingness to participate in planning processes.

Positive Side of the Narrative Turn in Planning

The narrative turn in planning has shown positive effects in different aspects of planning. Some of these can be summarized as below:

Inclusiveness and Representation

- **Empowering Marginalized Voices:** Narrative approaches allow for the inclusion of voices that are often marginalized in traditional planning processes, fostering a more democratic and inclusive planning environment.
- **Contextual Understanding:** Narratives provide rich, contextual insights into local experiences and challenges, enabling planners to develop more nuanced and context-sensitive solutions (see Nisi, et al., 2016).

Enhanced Communication and Collaboration

- **Building Trust and Understanding:** By sharing stories, stakeholders can build mutual **understanding** and trust, which is essential for effective collaboration and conflict resolution in planning.
- **Facilitating Dialogue:** Narratives serve as a medium for **dialogue**, helping to bridge gaps between different stakeholders and fostering a sense of shared purpose and vision (see Bostanli and Habisch, 2023).

Richer Analytical Frameworks

- **Complexity and Nuance:** Narrative methodologies can capture the complexity and nuance of urban experiences, providing a more holistic understanding of urban issues (see Satama and Räikkönen, 2020).
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Unlike rigid, technocratic approaches, narrative methodologies are flexible and adaptable, allowing planners to respond to changing circumstances and emerging challenges (see Bruce, et al., 2016).

Criticisms on the Narrative Turn in Planning

Critics of the narrative turn raise several concerns about its implications for planning theory and practice. These criticisms can be categorized into three main areas: epistemological, methodological, and practical.

Epistemological Criticisms and Challenges

- **Subjectivity and Relativism:** The narrative turn can lead to excessive subjectivity and relativism, undermining the objective basis of planning decisions. By prioritizing narratives over empirical evidence and technical analysis, planning risks becoming more about persuasion than rational problem-solving. The narrative rejection of grand narratives can lead to relativism and fragmentation. Without a coherent framework to integrate these diverse narratives, planning can become directionless and fragmented. This relativism can undermine the possibility of collective action and consensus-building, essential components of effective planning. Flyvbjerg (2001, 2002) warned against the dangers of relativism, arguing that it can lead to a paralysis of decision-making. He advocated for a pragmatic approach that recognizes the importance of narratives but also emphasizes the need for empirical evidence and critical analysis. Richardson (2002) echoed this concern, arguing that planners must balance narrative insights with objective data.
- **Loss of Scientific Rigor:** The emphasis on narratives may dilute the scientific rigor and technical expertise that are essential for effective planning. Critics argue that planning should be grounded in robust data and analytical methods rather than subjective stories (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2002).
- **Fragmentation and Lack of Coherence:** The focus on multiple narratives can lead to fragmentation and a lack of coherence in planning. When numerous, often conflicting, stories are brought to the table, it can be challenging to synthesize them into a coherent plan that addresses the needs and aspirations of

all stakeholders. Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger (1998) argued that the narrative turn risks leading to fragmented planning processes where different narratives compete without resolution. They suggested that planners need to develop strategies for integrating diverse stories into a coherent framework. Healey (2006) also pointed out the need for mechanisms to bridge different narratives and create shared understandings.

- **Simplistic Understanding of Power:** One of the primary critiques of the narrative turn is its often-simplistic understanding of power dynamics. Critics argue that focusing on narratives can obscure the deeper structural and material forces shaping urban development. By privileging stories over structural analysis, the narrative turn risks neglecting the economic, political, and institutional contexts that significantly influence planning outcomes.

Methodological Criticisms and Challenges

- **Bias and Manipulation:** Narratives can be powerful tools for persuasion, but this also means they can be manipulated for political or ideological purposes. Narratives can be selectively constructed and used to serve specific interests, potentially leading to biased and inequitable planning outcomes (see Gunder, 2003). There is a risk that powerful actors may use narratives to advance their interests while disguising them as inclusive and participatory processes. Gunder (2010) highlighted the potential for narratives to be used as instruments of manipulation and control. He argued that planners must be vigilant about the ways narratives are constructed and used, ensuring that they do not become tools for reinforcing existing

power structures. Yiftachel (1998) similarly warned against the co-optation of narrative-based approaches by powerful interests.

- **Lack of Generalizability:** The focus on specific, context-dependent narratives may limit the generalizability of planning knowledge. Critics argue that planning should aim for broader applicability and replicable insights rather than isolated, anecdotal accounts (see Healey, 1997).
- **Overemphasis on Process:** The narrative turn places significant emphasis on the process of storytelling and engagement. While this focus on process is important, critics argue that it can sometimes come at the expense of substantive outcomes. The quality of the stories and the engagement process can become an end, rather than a means to achieve tangible planning goals.
- **Evaluation and Accountability:** Evaluating the success of narrative-based planning approaches can be challenging. Traditional planning relies on measurable outcomes and indicators, but narratives are qualitative and subjective. This raises questions about how to assess the effectiveness of narrative-based interventions and hold planners accountable. Innes and Booher (1999) pointed out that narrative-based approaches require new evaluation frameworks that can capture the qualitative dimensions of planning. They argued that narrative-based processes facilitate inclusive dialogue and mutual understanding. However, these frameworks are still evolving and can be difficult to implement in practice.

Practical Criticisms and Challenges

- **Implementation Challenges:** Integrating narrative approaches into planning practice can be challenging, particularly in bureaucratic and technocratic planning systems. There may be resistance from planners and policymakers who are accustomed to more traditional, technical methods (Forester, 1999).
- **Overly Optimistic View of Participation:** One of the central tenets of the narrative turn is the belief that involving diverse narratives in the planning process leads to more inclusive

and democratic outcomes. However, this premise often overlooks the complexities and challenges of genuine participation. In many cases, the inclusion of narratives can be tokenistic, serving to legitimize predetermined plans rather than genuinely influencing decision-making processes (Healey, 2006). Moreover, the assumption that all voices can be equally heard and valued ignores the reality of social hierarchies and power imbalances that shape whose stories are listened to and acted upon.

- **Underestimation of Power Dynamics:** Fainstein (2010) argues that planning is inherently political, with powerful actors often dominating the discourse and decision-making processes. The narrative turn tends to underplay the role of power in shaping urban spaces and planning processes. While narratives can indeed influence planning, they do so within a broader context of power relations that determine whose stories are considered legitimate and whose are marginalized. The narrative turn's focus on stories and discourses can sometimes obscure these power dynamics, leading to an overly idealistic view of planning as a neutral and inclusive process.
- **Democratic Legitimacy:** While the narrative turn aims to enhance democratic engagement, critics argue that it can inadvertently undermine democratic legitimacy. If narratives are dominated by more articulate or influential groups, they may not reflect the broader community's interests and needs (Innes and Booher, 2010).
- **Resource-Intensiveness:** Engaging with narratives and facilitating inclusive dialogue can be resource-intensive. It requires time, skills, and

financial resources that may not be readily available, particularly in resource-constrained planning contexts. Amin (2002) noted that while narrative-based approaches can enhance inclusivity, they often demand significant resources. This can be a barrier for planners working in under-resourced settings. Legacy (2017) also highlighted the practical challenges of implementing narrative-based methods, particularly in terms of time and capacity.

- **Lack of Critical Approach and Co-optation by Neoliberal Agendas:** Another significant critique is the potential for the narrative turn to be co-opted by neoliberal agendas. In neoliberal governance, the emphasis on individual stories and personal experiences can be used to promote a market-driven approach to planning, where success is measured by marketability and consumer appeal rather than social justice or collective well-being. This co-optation can lead to tokenistic engagement practices that prioritize certain narratives over others, often sidelining the voices of the most marginalized. In a neoliberal context, planners often find themselves in a contradictory position. On the one hand, they are expected to promote inclusive and participatory planning processes. On the other hand, they operate within a system that prioritizes economic growth and market efficiency. This tension can lead to a superficial adoption of narrative-based approaches, where the emphasis on stories and discourses is more about managing public perception and gaining legitimacy than genuinely transforming planning practices (see Sager, 2011). While the narrative turn advocates for inclusive and democratic planning, in practice, these participatory processes can be manipulated to serve neoliberal interests. For example, community consultations and storytelling sessions may be used to justify development projects that lead to displacement and gentrification, rather than genuinely addressing the needs and aspirations of marginalized communities (see Purcell, 2009).

- **The Commodification of Urban**

Narratives: In the neoliberal city, narratives themselves can become commodities. Stories and discourses about urban spaces are often used as marketing tools to attract investment, tourists, and affluent residents. This commodification of narratives can undermine their emancipatory potential, turning them into instruments for promoting consumerism and spatial inequality (see Zukin, 1995). The narrative turn's focus on storytelling can inadvertently contribute to this process, as planners and developers harness local stories to sell a particular vision of the city.

- **Professional Identity and Skills:** The narrative turn challenges the traditional identity and skill set of planners. Traditionally trained as technical experts, planners may find it difficult to adopt the role of storytellers and facilitators of discourse. This shift requires new skills in communication, mediation, and interpretive analysis. Forester (1999) discussed the need for planners to develop skills in listening, storytelling, and facilitation. However, this transition is not straightforward. Planners may struggle with balancing their technical expertise with the demands of narrative-based approaches. Innes and Booher (2010) argued that planning education and training need to evolve to equip planners with these new skills.

Conclusion: Towards a Critical Narrative Turn in Planning

As the narrative turn in planning continues to evolve, there is a growing recognition of the need for a critical narrative turn. This approach seeks to address the limitations and challenges of narrative methodologies by incorporating critical perspectives and ensuring that narratives are used in a more reflexive

and transformative manner. In final words, here are some proposals for a more critical and reflective approach and practice:

Critical Reflexivity and Sensitivity to Power Structures

Fischer and Forester (1993) emphasized the importance of critical reflexivity in planning, arguing that planners must continuously reflect on their own biases and assumptions. They suggested "lllll l iiiii iii" where they remain open to learning from diverse perspectives. A critical narrative turn should involve a reflexive examination of power dynamics within narrative processes, ensuring that narratives are not manipulated by powerful actors and that marginalized voices are genuinely empowered. Critical reflexivity also involves considering the ethical implications of narrative methodologies, ensuring that narratives are used responsibly and with sensitivity to the context and experiences of participants.

A critical narrative turn requires a recognition of the power dynamics that shape urban narratives. Planners must be aware of whose stories are heard and valued and whose are marginalized. This involves critically examining the social hierarchies and power relations that influence the planning process and striving to amplify the voices of marginalized communities.

Transformative Potential

Promoting genuine participation requires moving beyond the tokenistic inclusion of narratives to create meaningful and impactful engagement processes. Planners must develop strategies for involving diverse communities in decision-making and ensuring that their voices have a real influence on planning outcomes. This involves creating spaces for dialogue, building trust, and addressing the structural barriers that prevent marginalized groups from participating fully in the planning process. A critical narrative turn moves beyond the mere representation of diverse voices to actively challenge and transform oppressive structures and practices in urban planning. By focusing on social justice and equity, a critical narrative turn seeks to create more just and inclusive urban environments, addressing systemic inequalities and promoting the well-

being of all urban residents.

Integration with Other Methodologies

Planners should strive to integrate narrative insights with empirical analysis to create robust and credible planning outcomes. This involves using mixed methods approaches that combine qualitative and quantitative data, as well as developing new evaluation frameworks that capture the qualitative dimensions of planning. Creswell (2014) advocated for the use of mixed methods in planning research, arguing that this approach can provide a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues. A critical narrative turn recognizes the value of integrating narrative methodologies with other planning approaches, such as quantitative analysis and spatial modeling, to create a more comprehensive and robust planning framework. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, a critical narrative turn can draw on diverse perspectives and expertise, enhancing the capacity of planners to address complex urban challenges.

Building Capacity and Skills

Finally, to effectively implement narrative-based approaches, planners need training and capacity-building in areas such as storytelling, facilitation, and interpretive analysis. Planning education and professional development programs should incorporate these skills to prepare planners for the demands of narrative-based practice.

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