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Christophe Mager and Laurent Matthey

Tales of the City. Storytelling as a contemporary tool of urban planning and design

- 1 Almost thirty years ago, as the social sciences underwent their ‘discursive turn’, Bernardo Secchi (1984) drew, in what he called the ‘urban planning narrative’, the attention of planners to the production of myths, turning an activity often seen as primarily technical into one centred on the production of images and ideas. This conception of planning practice gave rise to a powerful current of research in English-speaking countries. Efforts were made to both combine the urban planning narrative with storytelling (Throgmorton 2007, 2003, Sandercock 2003; Eckstein and Throgmorton 2003) and to establish storytelling as a prescriptive or descriptive model for planning practice (van Hulst 2012).
- 2 The transition from the urban planning narrative to storytelling, and then the spread of storytelling as the cardinal principle of planning practice, is manifested within what is temptingly called ‘fictional urbanism’ (Matthey 2011)—that is, urbanism that tends to substitute narrative production for real production of cities and territory. This is planning that is, ultimately, not that far away from the society of the spectacle theorised by Guy Debord. However, it radicalises (Matthey 2014a) the spectacular apparatuses referred to by Debord (1988) as the ‘integrated spectacle’, in the sense that ‘all that which was once directly experienced has now become mere representation’, while at the same time ‘the spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity which cannot be discussed and which is out of reach. [All it says] is ‘What appears is good, and what is good appears’’ (op.cit: s.p., pers. trans.).
- 3 Storytelling, of course, refers to a selective retelling of political communication (Salmon 2007). It is based on the premise that a good story is more valuable than mere facts. The desire to create fiction that can produce an always-already present reality (the future urban beach, the next stadium, the essential major project, the inescapable regeneration of docklands...), whose emergence is to be facilitated, can be something other than an aspect of democratic communication—it can be a means of ensuring the collective governmentality of citizens (Matthey 2014b).
- 4 Thus, just as storytelling is supposed to have led democratic communication off track through a pronounced concern for a good story, storytelling applied to the field of urban production may have led to an increasing preoccupation with staging and showmanship in projects to the detriment of their real inclusion in political debate. It is this possible transformation of the territorial action (Matthey 2015) that will be the focus of the articles collected in this special issue of *Articulo – Journal of Urban Research*.
- 5 Laurent Devisme is interested in the growing demand for regional storytelling in a context of renewal of regional planning actions. He believes this entails a risk of ‘saturation of the public sphere’ and proposes reactivating an ‘urbanist critique’ that can ‘take seriously the functions of collective composition that produce iconic and verbal images’ and the ‘effects of visualisation and ‘visibilisation’ that they achieve, as well as more realistic incorporation into the contemporary urban experience’.
- 6 It is the work of ‘visibilisation’ described by Laurent Devisme that is analysed by Lise Fournier through a case study of Madrid universities. The author examines the way in which ‘the university project is a symbol of construction of a metropolitan mythology’. She reminds us that urban marketing strategies are based on a project of identity-building construction, fabricating images and stories that are more or less out of step with reality. Yet above all she shows us the way in which great cultural events and great architectural gestures partake of fictional urban planning conceived of as the driving force of metropolitan mobilisation, demonstrating how storytelling makes it possible to govern urban production.

- 7 Belinda Redondo, on the other hand, focuses on the new understanding of urban space that is taking shape in new artistic public procurement. Public art has become an almost classical mode of production of urban visibility. The alliance of public art and the urban project is built around 'a narrative process within which the official discourses' take on considerable importance, centring the plot on 'the logic of attractiveness and competitiveness of territories'. The storytelling that unfolds around this new alliance also examines, in the second phase, 'the position of the citizen in this 'promotional' narrativisation of the metropolis'.
- 8 Manuel Appert and Christian Montes pursue the same line of thought in their discussion of the promotional narrativisation of the metropolis. Their field of study is the new governance of the London skyline, which is both a material and symbolic structure, revealing a 'new local geopolitical order' in which the developers have obtained the support of the local communities'. This order is characterised by 'the adoption of a standardised architectural language common to the global players in real estate' along with distinctiveness allowed by the unique staging of the London landscape.
- 9 Florence Bétrisey analyses the use of storytelling in an urban milieu on another continent. Her case study examines SAGUAPAC, a Bolivian water management cooperative. She describes four phases of storytelling ('mythification, identification, emotionalisation and personification') capable of producing attachment 'by instrumentalising local myths and legends, as well as the 'Camba' ethnic identity', allowing Saguapac 'to retain its old members and recruit new ones'. She shows how the urban narrative (in the sense of a big progressive narrative) and storytelling (in the sense of a story-making machine) are becoming hybrid in a strategy akin to Foucault's notion of governmentality.
- 10 Lucas Oesch continues this line of reflection on the diversity of the narrative systems of urban planning, especially in a context of conflict. He shows how a certain form of storytelling that renders visible 'the improvement of the living conditions' of Palestinian refugees has accompanied the spread of 'humanitarian urban planning' in Jordan. However, such urban planning seems to be globally 'de-dramatised' compared to the 'staging' of the predominant type of Jordanian planning aimed at neo-liberal restructuring of the areas in the centre and west of Amman'. The narrativisation of the development of the camps seems to be a tool for neutralisation of the debate, the vehicle 'of an ingenious compromise' making it possible to perpetuate sites that are ephemeral by nature in hope of development and insertion into the city of Amman.
- 11 Finally, Luanda Vannuchi and Mathieu Van Crielingen break free from the reflections on the use of storytelling in urban planning and regional development; instead, they examine—based on a subject (namely, the Olympics), which is traditionally analysed on the basis of 'models of entrepreneurial urban governance, of large-scale gentrifying urban projects, growth coalitions, or policies of symbolism and of regional brand image'—the operational nature of the concept of 'accumulation through dispossession' introduced by David Harvey in his analysis of urban development. This is another way of deconstructing the 'enormous undeniable and inaccessible positivity' that is often prevalent in the way in which large-scale urban products appear.

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Abstracts

Almost thirty years ago, as the social sciences underwent their 'discursive turn', Bernardo Secchi (1984) drew, in what he called the 'urban planning narrative', the attention of planners to the production of myths, turning an activity often seen as primarily technical into one centred around the production of images and ideas. This conception of planning practice gave rise to a powerful current of research in English-speaking countries. Efforts were made to both combine the urban planning narrative with storytelling and to establish storytelling as a prescriptive or descriptive model for planning practice. Thus, just as storytelling is supposed to have led democratic communication off track through a pronounced concern for a good story, storytelling applied to the field of urban production may have led to an increasing preoccupation with staging and showmanship for projects to the detriment of their real inclusion in political debate. It is this possible transformation of the territorial action that will be the focus of the articles collected in this special issue of *Articulo – Journal of Urban Research*.

Les contes de la ville. Storytelling et production du territoire

Il y a près de trente ans, parallèlement à l'émergence, dans les sciences sociales, d'un tournant discursif, Bernardo Secchi évoquait, au moyen de ce qu'il appelait alors le "récit d'urbanisme", le souci des urbanistes pour la production de mythes, faisant d'une activité souvent considérée comme principalement technique, un travail centré sur la fabrique d'images et d'imaginaires. Cette conception de la pratique urbanistique donnera lieu à un puissant courant de recherche dans le monde anglo-saxon. On y tendra d'une part à faire converger récit d'urbanisme et storytelling; d'autre part, à poser le storytelling comme un modèle prescriptif ou descriptif de la pratique urbanistique. De même que le storytelling est supposé avoir dévoyé la communication démocratique dans un souci marqué pour la bonne histoire, il se pourrait que storytelling appliqué au champs de la production urbaine aie conduit à ce que l'on soigne de plus en plus la mise en scène et en spectacle des projets aux dépens de leur réelle mise en débat politique. C'est cette possible transformation de l'action territoriale (Matthey 2015) que souhaite appréhender les différentes contributions rassemblées dans numéro spécial *d'Articulo – Journal of Urban Research*.

Index terms

Mots-clés : urbanisme, storytelling, aménagement, projétation, projet urbain

Keywords : urbanism, storytelling, urban planning, urban design, urban project