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What is This?

# Storytelling, a model *of* and a model *for* planning

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## Abstract

Interest in storytelling in planning has grown over the last two decades. In this article two strands of research are identified: research that looks at storytelling as a model *of* the way planning *is* done and research that looks at storytelling as a model *for* the way planning could or should be done. Recently, the second strand has received the most attention. This article builds on theories of storytelling as an important aspect of everyday planning practice. It draws on an ethnographic case in which a range of actors struggled with the meaning of what was going on, (re)framing the past, present and future with the help of stories. The case illustrates how new stories are built on top of older ones and new understandings emerge along the way. The article also looks into the relationship between storytelling and other planning activities. The article ends with a plea for ethnographic fieldwork to further develop ideas on storytelling in planning practice.

## Keywords

storytelling, ethnography, politics, sense-making

## Introduction

Many inhabitants thought the new town centre in the Dutch Heart-less Town would never materialize.[1] For more than 20 years the centre had been fought over in the political arena. Political parties, aldermen, mayors, residents, local entrepreneurs, planners and project developers all had strong ideas about it. In 2002, a new alderman restarted the planning process. In just a few years' time he and his compatriots were able to make more progress than any of their predecessors. Now, how had they been able to do that? How did planning the centre finally become a successful enterprise? These kinds of questions fit many cases. But this case is a critical one in the sense that what we are dealing with here is a 'small miracle'. Failure followed failure for a long time. Cynicism grew among those directly involved and among the members of the general public. In

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these types of cases the hope of turning things around often slowly dies. If things do work out well in the end, we ask ourselves what 'strategies of convergence' (Mandelbaum, 1991) the actors used.

What we see in such situations is that actors together had to make sense of what had been going on, what was going on and what should, or at least could, be done. A useful way to look at these cases is in terms of storytelling.[2] Since much has been written about stories over the last two decades, we should be clear about the concept from the start. Although storytelling can be found everywhere, not everything is a story (Riessman, 2008).[3] Here, I adopt the idea that stories depict what has happened to actors in a certain setting (Chatman, 1978). For something to be a story it should be built from events involving actors who are placed in a temporal and spatial setting. Telling stories is not just listing events. Through the specific way in which stories represent that what has happened, they emplot the past. That is, they connect story elements in such a way that they form a coherent whole.

Through telling and listening to stories, actors in the present not only make sense of the past, but also prepare for the future. This 'future-directedness', the imagination that is part of or that is enabled by stories, is especially relevant for practices such as planning. Although planning involves dealing with what the past had on offer, planning processes are of course always to a large extent about the future, as actors can imagine it. Stories that can be found in planning processes will, therefore, often contain explicit ideas about future events and the role of various actors (human and non-human) in bringing them about. To draw on the language of problem-setting, stories will '[set] out a view of what is wrong and what needs fixing' (Schön, 1993: 144). Stories in themselves have the ability not just to talk about *what is*, but also about *what ought to be* (Rein and Schön, 1977).

A reflective storytelling session is just what seems needed when planning efforts result in nothing tangible over time. A consultant might add that when all hope seems lost, communities are in need of a strong leader with a good story who helps them see what is possible and believe in a happy ending again. But it is not that simple. In cases like the one introduced above, there is not just one storyteller, there typically are countless storytellers competing for attention. And they strongly disagree and are willing to fight for their vision, as long as it takes. In addition, stories are just a part of what planning is about. That is why, as analysts, we should first want to know more about the political process through which some stories about the past and the present become dominant guidelines for the future while others fail to play that role.

Although the interest in storytelling in planning has grown over the last two decades (Mandelbaum, 1991; Forester, 1993, 1999; Throgmorton, 1992, 1996, 2003, 2007; Van Eeten, 1999; Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003; Uprichard and Byrne, 2006; Jensen, 2007; Childs, 2008; Hajer et al., 2010; Van Dijk, 2011) and storytelling is seen as an important 'tool' in planning practice (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000; Sandercock, 2003a, 2003b, 2010), the further development of ideas about it depends both on the enrichment of its theoretical foundation, for example through the application of a narrative lens in the analysis of more cases and through an investigation into the connection between storytelling and other planning activities. Both routes are taken here. This article offers an in-depth analysis of a case in which a range of actors with diverse ideas and interests were engaged in a struggle over meaning.

Using narrative analysis to look at such cases has been done before (e.g. Throgmorton, 1996), but it has not been done often. Jensen's (2007) recent article on cultural urban branding in Aalborg, for example, did offer a thorough analysis of opposing stories, but failed to show the actors' 'moves' in the struggle. Other contributions that have laid the foundation on which this article builds have mainly focused on what individual stories do (Forester, 1993) and more theoretically on what storytelling as an activity could or should contribute to planning (Mandelbaum, 1991; Sandercock, 2003a; Throgmorton, 2003). Empirical (micro)studies of storytelling in practice allow us to zoom in on the political process that is inherent in storytelling and between storytelling and other planning activities.

The outline of this article is as follows. The article will first review various ideas on storytelling in planning. The case introduced at the beginning will then be described, analysed and used as an illustration of what more we might learn about planning processes from looking at storytelling. In particular, the case being examined will help us to understand more of the political work that stories do, which manifests itself in the way stories are related to one another and the way in which storytelling is related to other planning activities that surround it.

## Storytelling in planning

The importance of storytelling in planning is not new. Various researchers have argued that it is crucial. The work of James Throgmorton, John Forester and Leonie Sandercock is used here to sketch the main ideas. According to Throgmorton (1992, 1996, 2003, 2007), planning *is* constitutive and persuasive storytelling about the future. If they do it well, planners try to shape the 'flow of future action' when they tell stories about 'interesting and believable' characters who act in specific settings.[4] In the course of these stories, which run from conflict through crisis to resolution, the main characters change or are significantly 'moved'. Stories that are told also adopt certain points of view. They draw upon imagery and rhythm of language to express a certain attitude towards the situation at hand. Finally, Throgmorton (2007: 250) has argued that 'it is not merely the individual stories that count, but *storytelling* and the complex social networks, physical settings, and institutional processes in which those stories are told' (italics in the original).[5]

Forester (1993, 1999, 2006, 2009) gives importance to the analysis of what he has called *practice stories*. In 1993 (p.195) he wrote that these stories

> …do particular kinds of work: descriptive work of reportage; moral work of constructing character and reputation (of oneself and others); political work of identifying friends and foes, interests and needs, and the play of power in support and opposition; and, most important […], deliberative work of considering ends and means, values and options, what is relevant and significant, what is possible and what matters, all together.

During various kinds of encounters, actors construct practice stories together. Problems actors are facing and their relationships with other actors are deliberated in the storytelling. And stories do not only tell us much about the world the planners are dealing with, they also tell us a lot about the planners themselves (Forester, 1999: 78).

By organizing our attention, they give us the details, messiness and particulars that matter to the storyteller(s) (Forester, 1993: 201). They also show the moral stance of the teller. In general, listening to and telling stories are fundamental activities in everyday planning practice.

A third well-known researcher, Sandercock (2003a, 2003b, 2010; Sandercock and Attili, 2010), has written about the various applications of storytelling. According to Sandercock (2003a: 12), '[p]lanning is performed through storytelling, in a myriad of ways. [...] in process, as a catalyst for change, as a foundation, in policy, in pedagogy, in explanation and critique as well as justification of the status quo, and as moral exemplars' (italics in original).[6] Sandercock has pointed out that storytelling is often an important part of, if not central to, community participation processes and in those branches of planning practice that deal with conflict situations.[7] In these processes, storytelling has to be facilitated, has to offer people the opportunity to tell and listen to each other. The act of storytelling is not just nice, it is necessary (cf. Ortony, 1975, on metaphors). Through telling and re-telling, actors shape their identities. Stories told might reflect some core of a community and at the same time limit or facilitate the ways in which communities can change (cf. Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003).[8]

## Model *of* and model *for*

The three authors references above all pointed to many possibilities of a narrative approach. They have told us that stories are about the things that matter to people. In their work they stressed the social nature of storytelling when they pointed to the importance of audiences, and the way stories construct and carry the identities of groups. At the same time, politics are never far removed from their writings.[9] All three authors made us aware of the presence of conflicting stories in the many communities (cf. Mandelbaum, 1991) and argued for the need to create space for stories, and the emotions that speak through them. They have warned us about the way in which power can shape how stories 'get told, get heard and get weight' (Sandercock, 2003a: 26), while at the same time advocating for hope for the future when they told us what stories could do (Forester, 1999; Sandercock, 2003a; Throgmorton, 2003: 136, 2007: 249–253).

If we compare the authors with each other and early publications with later ones, an interesting difference can be found between the ways in which storytelling can be approached in research. This can be seen in the way storytelling as an activity is framed, but also in the way storytelling has been researched. To see this, we need to look at the idea of models *of* action and models *for* action that the anthropologist Geertz (1993: 93) used to talk about culture.[10] The system of symbols we call culture, Geertz said, can be seen as a model of how people behave but is also used by these people as a model to guide their future behaviour. For analytical purposes, the two positions on storytelling are interesting to distinguish:

1.  Storytelling as a model *of* planning. Looking at planning processes, Throgmorton (1992, 1996: xv; cf. Sandercock, 2003a: 26) argued that planning practice is much like telling stories. Storytelling is fundamental to planning. Planning documents and the plans themselves also tell stories. Weaker versions of this position

would claim that actors in practice tell stories and that this activity is an important *aspect* of planning (Forester, 1993).

2. Storytelling as a model *for* planning. Sandercock (2003a; see also, Forester, 1999: Chapter 2; Throgmorton, 2003), for example, did not just claim that planning is done through storytelling, but that storytelling should be used explicitly in order to improve planning practice. Ideas on what good storytelling is should be applied to planning. Here, storytelling is used as a 'tool.' Stories are used 'in the service of change, as shapers of a new imagination of alternatives' (Sandercock, 2003a: 9).

Taking storytelling as a model of (or metaphor for) what planners do is of course central to what one would call a narrative approach. Throgmorton's early work is the clearest example of this. What the researcher does is reconstruct stories from practice. Forester also empirically showed the work individual stories do. His views regarding stories are not as radical as Throgmorton's, since he did not suggest planning to be in the first place about storytelling. Where Throgmorton saw storytelling as a model, Forester put an emphasis on storytelling as a way to learn from each other (see also Forester, 2006).[11]

Forester's later work (e.g. 1999: chapters 3–8, 2009) built on his initial observations, stressing the importance of listening to stories in the field and from the field. This is where a more normative approach becomes visible. Forester tells us stories might remind audiences of what is important and allow all to see options they had not thought of before. Telling stories and listening to them might be a way to (slowly) reach mutual recognition or reconciliation of deep conflict, or a way to recover from trauma. Ritualized storytelling processes can offer hope where hope had seemed lost (Forester, 1999: 78, 136). Recently, Forester (2009) has shown how storytelling can make an important contribution to the way communities and groups in conflict with each other can 'deal with differences.'

In a similar vein, Sandercock (2003a) advocates for storytelling explicitly as a way to be doing planning. Stories, she said, can be catalysts for change. Thinking through storytelling as a model *for* planning makes us aware of the ways in which planning could be more inclusive, more democratic, if citizens are offered space to tell *their* stories. It encourages us to imagine how we can go from a shared community (core) story or a set of rival community stories to a credible plan (2003a). In Sandercock's recent work (Sandercock and Attili, 2010), she used film in order to simultaneously research and develop a community's narrative. This shows how storytelling as a model *for* is not merely about reconstructing stories, but rather about co-constructing stories.[12]

Studies using model *of* and studies using model *for* are not to be seen as accounts from different worlds. This would mean underestimating the way capable practitioners reflect on their own work. Practitioners, tacitly or not, know much about planning as storytelling and use that knowledge in their work (see, for instance, Forester, 1999). Also, academic ideas about storytelling have found their way back into practice (e.g. Hemel, 2010) and their influence makes a rigid separation between a model *of* and a model *for* problematic.

Academic researchers working on storytelling actually aim at influencing planning practice, rather than 'just' describing or explaining it. Throgmorton (1992, 1996), for

instance, illustrated that showing how storytelling is done can go hand-in-hand with offering a critique. Although he stayed a distance from the developments he studied, his arguments about storytelling went beyond the mere observation that planning is like storytelling. After showing why the actors in the case Throgmorton studied failed to persuade their audiences, he advised planners to become better storytellers. In order to persuade their audiences, he argued, planners have to take the points of view of their audiences into account. Texts that planners produce do not just mean what planners and those who hire them want them to mean. Because multiple readings are possible, planners might want to create some congruence between the stories they tell about themselves in public and the acts they perform (cf. Argyris and Schön, 1974). In addition, they should recognize that they are, at best, co-authors of their own stories, while being characters in someone else's story (Throgmorton, 1996).

Nevertheless, the empirical phenomenon in studies in which storytelling as an explicit activity is researched will very often be different from studies in which it is not. The reason for this is that the use of storytelling *as a tool* would normally reveal a commitment to more inclusive, community-focused forms of planning and less to bureaucratic, hierarchical forms that probably still form the bulk of instances of planning. Model *for* studies also entail a particular kind of storytelling. During exchanges that are focused on bringing stakeholders together to help them understand each other (which would be typical for storytelling as model *for* way of working), one would instead give plenty of time to various storytellers in order for a dialogue between them and their audiences to develop. Storytelling, then, is made central and treated as special. During storytelling as it takes place all of the time, without actors paying much attention to it *as* storytelling, it is not to be expected that the full rendering, exchange and co-construction of stories get priority. In most public meetings of politicians and administrators, for instance, a project is often only one item on a full agenda and speakers' time is limited.

All and all, if storytelling as a model *of* (aspect of) planning represents all cases of planning, storytelling is only seen as an explicit *model for* in a small subclass of these cases. At the same time, we could say that storytelling as a model *for* planning has been getting more academic attention lately than everyday storytelling. It is not just Sandercock's and Forester's later work that take this direction; Throgmorton's (2003) later work also fits this strand of research. Another example is a recent book on 'strong stories' in Dutch planning practice (Hajer et al., 2010). The book explains what strong stories could bring to practice and how they could be built. In an article by Childs (2008), we can read about the ways in which storytelling might play a central role in urban design. Van Dijk (2011: 18) recently said that regions 'need stories that can unify seemingly disjointed perspectives.' And finally, in studies of conflict and negotiation, Cobb (2010) argued that public officials could mediate urban conflicts. She promoted an interesting practice called 'narrative braiding', in which officials work at the interconnection of different, limited views of a conflict with one another in order to develop a more complex, inclusive story that does justice to differences. All these authors seem to suggest that stories and storytelling, if taken seriously, are powerful tools of a democratic, progressive planning practice.

There is much to say in favour of the more explicit use of storytelling in planning, but there are some risks of too narrow a focus. First, one might start to think that storytelling is something positive in itself. Much of the literature on storytelling in the social sciences starts from a positive attitude towards storytelling, intending, for instance, to (re)claim its

value compared to other forms of knowing (cf. Bruner, 1986). But that does not mean that storytelling in planning, as it takes place all of the time (in boardrooms, in meetings of civil servants, in meetings of citizens, etc.) always contributes to an inclusive, community-focused planning practice. It is only *a particular kind* of storytelling which is likely to have this characteristic; one in which many actors with different backgrounds, perspectives, values and interests come together and respectfully engage one another in the search for a way to deal with differences or even to live together in harmony.

Secondly, when actors take the metaphor 'planning is storytelling' for a statement of fact and forget to see how planning is *not* storytelling, they might overestimate the impact of facilitated storytelling sessions on the rest of the planning process. This is not to say that storytelling cannot be a powerful way to bring about change or that stories cannot empower people. However, although one could create separate spaces in which old stories could be shared and new stories could be constructed, those activities do not anchor their stories to the planning practice, yet. Storytelling sessions might remain uncoupled from other activities like formal decision-making, investigation or the making of concrete plans.

To enrich the theory of storytelling in planning, it is therefore of importance that cases of storytelling, in which storytelling remains largely implicit, are looked into, highlighting 1) the way in which storytelling is part of a political process in which various stories compete for attention and that most of the time has winners and losers, and 2) the way in which storytelling relates to other activities that do political work. Up until now, these issues have hardly been discussed explicitly in the literature. In order to study these issues, a close look at the interactions in the planning process and an investigation of its day-to-day dynamics on the ground are needed.

## Storytelling about a new centre in Heart-less Town

During a period of seven months, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Heart-less Town (Van Hulst, 2008a).[13] The focus of the fieldwork was on the planning of a new location for a town centre. The fieldwork entailed semi-participant observation in meetings of the Board of the mayor and aldermen, and meetings of civil servants (all closed to the public); meetings in town between aldermen, citizens, members of the civil society and others. Relevant documents were studied and interviews were conducted with about 50 actors. The case description below presents the planning process, including the various stories that circulated in Heart-less Town at the time of the study. Stories were defined as concrete representations of what happens to actors in a certain setting. This narrow way of defining stories means that, for example, a plan can tell an explicit story (that a researcher can reconstruct), but the plan as a whole is itself not a story.[14] In addition, the claim worked with here is not that planning *is* storytelling (the strongest claim), but that stories are used to talk about what is going on and what should be done with public spaces (the weaker claim). The stories for this case were reconstructed from conversations, interviews, documents and observation notes.

Actors did not tell the exact same stories all of the time, nor could I have expected that to happen as storytellers adjust their stories to specific audiences and the context of their telling (George, 1969). But from stories told in particular instances, the researcher can draw storylines, the basic plots of which can be condensed (Stone, 2002). In the case at

hand, there was a limited set of storylines in use. They are presented in Table 2. Ethnographic fieldwork and a narrative approach in general go well together (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). It can help the researcher to look beyond story-texts themselves, to investigate story*telling* and the context in which storytelling takes place. In this particular research project, observation, conversations and interviewing – while the planning process was in motion – made it possible to see how new storylines developed and gained momentum and to understand how storytelling related to other planning activities (Van Hulst, 2008b).

## The missing heart

Heart-less Town is a town with approximately 25,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Netherlands. The story about the town, told to me in various, slightly different manners, could be summarized as follows: 'In the 1960s our town was a small town, but since then it has grown rapidly. Our town has a shopping centre, but it lacks a heart. For 25 years we have been planning a centre. Some were in favour of Location 1, others in favour of Location 2. Up until now, however, none of the plans has materialized.' This *Missing-heart-story* seems to be the 'core story' (Sandercock, 2003a) in place. Everybody in the community seemed to agree on the need of a heart. A more elaborated, official (hi)story – as was found in local and regional newspaper articles at the time of the planning process – can be summarized as follows:

> Halfway through the 1970s a small shopping centre was built in the town. From the second half of the following decennium, a discussion developed about the expansion of this centre. A period followed in which one plan after another was proposed. Most actors were in favour of some version of an expansion of the present centre at Location 1, while others were in favour of building a new centre at Location 2 – a spot that hosted some sporting facilities and a park. During the 1990s and the first year of the new millennium, the local authority twice came close to actually building a centre. Most notably, from 1999 onwards, a plan was made that was a lot bigger than what was envisioned beforehand. It was called the Centre Vision and it was aimed at realizing 'a complete centre' at Location 1, not just a shopping centre. In 2001, a large majority in the council supported the plan. Nevertheless, due to a conflict with the project developer about the cost of the new centre, two 'independent scientists of fame' came to what the local media called 'a devastating conclusion': the design of the new centre was not feasible for both financial and legal reasons. Soon after, in March 2002, the alderman in charge of the planning lost the municipal elections and the planning process came to a hold.

All and all, much of the centre planning had been a discussion over the right location. Location 1 had dominated the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. Local government, however, had failed to realize the new centre there.

## A new period

Now came a critical moment in time. At least this is how it was framed by the new, dominant protagonist, Mr Koehoorn. A short time before the elections (which the previously mentioned alderman failed to win), some citizens had organized a small campaign to

promote the candidacy of their fellow citizen Koehoorn on the municipal council. He was said to be knowledgeable about local issues and had the capacity and administrative experience to deal with complicated planning matters. Within a week after the elections, the new coalition appointed him the new alderman in charge of planning a new centre. This was the issue that was granted the highest priority in the coalition agreement. The new alderman, allegedly a long-time supporter of Location 2, energetically started to develop a new plan for the new centre. In the regional newspaper, he said:

> In the past, ambition has prevailed over feasibility. There was a lack of expertise that is again the result of the size of the municipality. My starting point is: with both feet firmly on the ground. We are here to build a centre that suits [Heart-less Town], not to realize daydreams.

For the new alderman, the story about the town without a heart had actually turned into a story about problematic planning and about administrators who have been too ambitious. The solution that the Alderman introduced to deal with the planning problem could be called 'going back to basics.' Arguing it was *now or never*, Alderman Koehoorn created a sense of urgency. In his *Back-to-Basics Story,* the town and its governors had a final opportunity to make things right. What we should do now, he announced, is look ahead to the future (the coming 30 years) and not back at the past (25 years of failed planning). The way out, therefore, was presented in the form of oppositions. The past was framed as ambitious, emotional and daydreaming; the future would be filled with feasibility, reason and realism.

The Back-to-Basics Story dominated the planning for quite a while. No alternative story reached public debate until the final decision was about to be made. But, how did the Alderman create opposition between the past and the present? How did he bring the Back-to-Basics Story to life? In 2002, the Alderman first 'unravelled the legal spaghetti,' as he called it, that was left after the previous planning effort failed. At the same time, he made sure he had the project developer on his side. He also hired consultants to work with the local bureaucracy. The following year, a viability study on the size of the new centre was undertaken. The report, which was ready in November 2003, described calculations for the 'critical mass' necessary to attract retailers who operate at the national level, customer needs, the proportion of food and non-food outlets, but also acknowledged the wish in Heart-less Town to build a centre that was more than 'just shops, [a] centre that will become the 'sparkling heart' of the municipality.'

After this report, not just Locations 1 and 2, but in total five possible building sites were investigated for their suitability as a centre. One of Koehoorn's colleagues explained to me that looking at five locations instead of two was meant to remove attention from the everlasting battle between Locations 1 and 2. Koehoorn himself talked about 'determining the DNA' of the five selected locations.

While the civil servants were busy gathering facts, the Alderman chaired 10 meetings with representatives of various segments of society (groups in civil society and business), and four meetings with the residents who lived in the vicinity of the locations under investigation. During these meetings, which were structured mostly as one-way communications, Alderman Koehoorn told his audience about the why, what and how of planning the new centre. He talked about the need for a new centre and painted a history

**Table 1.** Overview of new period.

| | |
|---|---|
| April 2002 | Start new planning period |
| June 2003–February 2004 | Investigations |
| March–May 2004 | Political debate |
| May 2004 | Council decision |

of problematic planning. The Alderman illustrated the situation with small stories, for example, about a shop that had to close down because there were not enough customers coming to the shopping centre. Admitting that local government had failed up until that moment, he emphasized that planning would be different this time (for an overview of the planning process, see Table 1).

## A final decision

In March 2004, investigation of the locations was finished. Suitability scores for the various locations were tallied on a scale of 1.0 to 100.0. Location 2 was the best location (with 81.6 points), followed at quite a distance by Location 3 (68.4). Surprisingly enough for the actors involved, Location 1 was third (66.2). Selected twice in the past, Location 1 had always been one of the two top contenders. The Board members doubted, however, whether simply choosing Location 2 was what they wanted, and what their political parties would find credible.[15] They knew Location 1 was still very popular with council members. Moreover, everybody wanted the centre to be a 'heart', and this is exactly the connotation that had been linked with Location 1 in the previous plan. Therefore, something had to be done to satisfy those who were still in favour of that location. Halfway through April the Board decided to choose Location 2, after adding that an 'organic link' between Locations 1 and 2 had to be created. This organic link was defined as an area to be developed between the two that would connect the locations to each other.

The Board presented its decision as a proposal to choose Location 2. The council then had to make the final, authoritative decision. At this point, the process became more hectic. The actors in and around politics were debating the Location Report and the Board's proposal. The political parties in particular did not accept the proposal they were confronted with, which could be concluded from the 150 written questions about the Report and proposal. The Board organized three public sessions to which they invited residents living in the area surrounding Location 2, the inhabitants of Heart-less Town more generally, and representatives of the social sectors. Various council committee members were dissatisfied with the poor results shown for Location 1 and asked for additional calculations. The heated fights of the past between supporters of Location 1 and supporters of Location 2 seemed to be repeating themselves.

On the second evening of the special meeting of the council committee, Mr Termaat, spokesman on the council committee for the coalition party Christian Democrats, put forward a new option. Termaat had been critical of the centre planning during the 'new' period, and his own alternative plan came to many as a surprise. In a speech, he argued that the decision for the centre was not a decision to be made just for 30 years to come,

as Alderman Koehoorn had argued, but for the coming 100 years. According to Termaat, Location 3 was better suited for a centre, mainly because the town would grow in the direction of Location 3. Termaat, in this way, used the result of the planning process to tell a story about a more distant future. This can be called the *Future Story*.

In spite of all the effort the Board and those working for it put into defending their choice, the vote in the council promised to be a close call. Some members of the Board tried to influence their party's vote. On the evening of the council meeting, Labor and the Christian Democrats – two coalition parties! – proposed to build on Location 3. After the Board twice threatened to resign and had even bargained backstage with their party leader, three out of four Christian Democrats took the side of the Board. The final vote, made at the end of an evening filled with tension, resulted in a victory of 13 votes over seven in favour of the Board's proposal. The centre would be built at Location 2.

Those in town who had been in favour of Location 1 or 3 had a very bad night. Meanwhile, the Alderman and his team celebrated the victory. But, we should ask, what about the rest of the people in Heart-less Town? Among the many more stories that can be told about this case, there is one that begs to be told. In the public meetings, some citizens suggested that a new centre was not necessary. In one of the interviews, a high-ranking civil servant in the Planning Department said that the current small centre could easily be renewed with a few investments. And, in a survey about the cost reductions the municipality could realize, a large group of citizens – unsolicited – expressed the idea of stopping the centre planning as a way to cut costs. All this suggests that some people had become rather cynical about the centre planning after all the failures leading up to the decision. They did not want a centre any longer and argued that it was the politicians who held onto 'the dream.' Nevertheless, this story remained largely under the surface of public life in Heart-less Town.

## Relating stories and related activities

In the previous section, the case and the stories told (see Table 2) were presented. Now, what have we learned about storytelling as a political aspect of planning? More specifically, what can we tell about the way in which stories relate to each other and the way storytelling is related to other activities that surround it? The case suggests some answers to these questions. What should be noted first is that actors tell different stories, not only in the obvious sense that they present clearly conflicting views of the world, but in a more subtle sense that narrators comment, build or elaborate on the stories that are circulating. Although there might certainly be opposing stories, an obvious clash is not apparent. Let us look more closely at how this works.

In this specific case, the basic story about the missing heart was presented as the starting point, the unquestioned framing of the problem. Although the main storyteller, Alderman Koehoorn, argued that the new planning period would be the opposite of previous efforts, he used the basic story to give his project credibility. His story built on the idea of a missing heart, adding to it a strong interpretation of what the problem with the problem was; that is, why the missing heart problem remained a problem for so long. The way the Alderman talked about it in his speeches, what was wrong with the present centre strongly resembled Stone's archetypical story of decline (Stone, 2002: 138):

**Table 2.** Practice stories in Heart-less Town.

| Title | Content |
| --- | --- |
| Missing Heart Story | Our town has a shopping centre, but it lacks a heart. For 25 years we have been planning. Some were in favour of Location 1, others in favour of Location 2. Up until now, however, none of the plans has materialized. |
| Back-to-Basics Story | For 25 years ambition, emotions and daydreaming have ruled the planning of the centre. The centre is dying and there is no more time to waste. Now it is time to realize a feasible, realistic centre. We have to forget about the past, go back to basics and focus on the future. |
| Future Story | We have been focusing on two locations for the new centre, but our thinking about the centre has been too limited. Our town will change over the coming decades. We should not look at the coming 30 years, but at the coming 100 years. Let us build on a new site. |
| Cynical Story | We have only seen failures in the centre's planning. Now we don't want a new centre anymore. Only the politicians are still interested in it. |

'In the beginning things were pretty good. But they got worse. In fact, right now, they are nearly intolerable. Something must be done.' In planning, like in politics, if you want to persuade actors of the necessity of change, it seems that you first have to tell a story about decline.

Opposition to the previous planning was used in order to explain why this time the story would have a happy ending. The story of decline was followed by a story of hope (Stone, 2002). The storyteller tried to show his audience how and why things could be different. At the same time, the Alderman gave little attention to the political feud (between supporters of Locations 1 and 2) that he could have included in his version of the heart story. The reasons for this seem to be that many actors knew the Alderman as a supporter of Location 2 and those references would have damaged his position as an authoritative storyteller. In addition, he did not want emotions to dominate the process.

In order to please his audience and build consensus, the Alderman and the Board offered a more complex and meaningful (in the sense of filled with more meaning) story when they argued for an organic link between Locations 1 and 2. It was not the 'truth' of this story enhancement that made a difference. There was not a single fact added. Rather, he conjured up the scene of a happy ending that hadn't been part of the previous tellings. He connected previously contending options and designed a new, collective story with the help of a metaphor (the 'organic link'). The Alderman and Board used a 'synthesizing strategy' (Mandelbaum, 1991). But some residents still doubted the sincerity behind all that the Alderman said because they knew him as a smart administrator who had always been in favour of Location 2. Thus, the story about going back to basics and even the additional metaphorical gesture were read as suspicious texts.[16] And, we know that only 'trusted storytellers endow the stories they tell with credibility' (Mandelbaum, 1991: 210).

The Alderman and the Board had introduced three new locations in an effort to get beyond the battle between the two options that had been fought over at various times

in the past. The new possible building sites served as window-dressing that would focus attention on the process and on various alternative possibilities. However, that one of the new locations became a serious competitor was an unintended consequence. The popularity of alternative location number 3 came as a surprise to the Alderman and his colleagues. Moreover, the story that accompanied this development did not try to counter previous stories, but built another story on top of it. The new narrator drew attention to expectations about the future that had not become part of the planning yet. The reasonable expectation that *the town is going to grow in a different direction* asked that attention be given to something that had been left out of the picture. The storyteller pointed to this future event saying: 'Look, this matters much to what we should be doing!' And, stretching the setting in terms of time meant that a different story could be told, one that reframed the problem and led to a different solution as well. Some council members were, all of a sudden, able to 'forget' (Baum, 1999) about their past preferences.

Finally, it should be noted that while the debate over the choice of location filled the headlines, the *Cynical Story* could be heard in public only occasionally, and did not reach the political agenda at all. This is understandable if we consider that the opportunity to publicly tell a story was unevenly accessible. This was the result of the traditional institutional structure of the planning process. Communication with citizens was typically a one-way communication. The politicians were telling their stories and hardly solicited stories from the citizens. The idea that a centre would perhaps no longer be desirable was ignored. As often happens, whether most citizens agreed, felt powerless or a bit of both never became clear. But if one wants to create a heart for a city, a place that becomes more than a shopping centre, finding out whether a new centre is what many citizens still want seems crucial.

That, in the end, the new story about a more distant future did not lead to a different location choice and that the *Cynical Story* was hardly heard can also be seen as the result of the activities that accompanied the storytelling. Let us now focus on this. Deciding where a centre of a town could be called a 'big decision' (Krieger, 1986). A centre shapes the identity of a town and thus deciding where a centre will be built has a big impact on the lives of many people living in a town. Such a decision can hardly be taken without a persuasive story that supports the choice. But, as the case illustrates, storytelling itself should not be seen as something isolated. Storytelling is important, but not everything that is important is reached through storytelling. Stories do part of the work. They mostly work at the level of sense or meaning-making. That is, they help actors to formulate what is important to them, what they value. They help put issues on the agenda, legitimize what is put on the agenda and reason towards a plausible, credible decision regarding those issues. At the same time, stories can be used to comment on or make use of what is on the agenda and the decision-making that develops. At this point, if a storyteller is working closely with other central actors such as investigators and decision-makers, various activities can be coupled and reinforce one another, and the story told can easily become dominant. This is what happened in the case under study. The story about the need to go back to basics came to dominate – not only or at least not necessarily because it was believed, but also because it was forcefully enacted in activities like investigating, decision-making in the Board and council, and in backstage bargaining.

The path towards the final big decision was paved with various little decisions which in themselves could be regarded as technical but helped to order the options according to their measurable suitability as a centre. For quite a while, investigations could be used to replace political debate and the storytelling that went with it. Facts stood in for emotions and imagination (referred to as 'daydreaming'). The concept of determining the 'DNA' of the locations invoked the idea that the locations had some hidden but objectively measurable and inescapable essence that could be uncovered by specialists. It also down-played the particular historical meaning of the locations to the actors within the munici-pality. Even though the DNA analogy draws on the idea of a human body, it does not have the same feel as metaphors like the 'heart of town' or an 'organic link'. The richness of the different locations was reduced to numbers that put them in a ranking order. One might also say that it was not just other activities but the whole institutional design of the process that prevented some stories from becoming dominant or even heard.

This, then, seems to be the secret of the success of the planning process. All this does not mean that storytelling itself could have been replaced by other activities. Storytelling became especially important at the moment that the process reached the (formal) deci-sion-making stage. This was also the moment that emotions came back into play: the Alderman and the Board tried to come up with a master story that was supposed to unite everybody. It was also the moment that an alternative story could be envisioned, one that made much sense to a group of council members. But it was too late to turn the tide. In the end, treats and backstage bargaining led to enough support for the Alderman's story to triumph.

## Towards an ethnography of storytelling

Researchers like Forester, Throgmorton and Sandercock have done an excellent job in 'translating' the concepts and ideas of story and storytelling into the planning domain and 'to render them accessible and useful for planning and its practices' (Friedmann, 2008: 248). They have taught us to see both the importance of storytelling in everyday planning and the possibilities of storytelling in future planning processes. Seeing story-telling as an important, everyday activity that takes place in all kinds of formal and informal social interactions and that slowly but steadily finds its way into plans equals accepting storytelling as a model *of* (or aspect of) planning. Focusing on its possibilities helps us to see storytelling as a model *for* planning, emphasizing the use of storytelling as a democratic, inclusive activity; one that offers space to a variety of actors, all with their own lived experiences and their emotions; one that enables actors to co-construct shared understandings of what their situation is and what can be done. Now, what can we learn from the preceding case about these two ways of looking at storytelling that is of relevance to planning theory and practice?

We already knew that actors involved in a planning process tell different and often conflicting stories about the situation they confront. Storytellers who are offered the opportunity to address the general public (often administrators, politicians or planners) normally try to select those elements from reality that make for a coherent and consistent narrative – something that makes sense and that allows for future action. But their stories,

even the most detailed ones, do not anticipate how others will themselves interpret and evaluate a situation. There always remain sets of untold or unheard stories; hidden stories that could have become important but were ignored (like the *Cynical Story* in the case).

Cases like the one described here remind us that, although storytelling can be used explicitly to make planning more democratic, it is already in use politically to persuade decision-makers and audiences and simultaneously draw the attention away from alternatives. Therefore, we need to be critical of storytelling as it takes place in everyday planning. As Sandercock (2003a: 22) told us: 'We need to understand the mechanisms of story, both in order to tell good stories ourselves, and to be more critical of the stories we have to listen to.' As critical researchers, administrators, politicians, planners and citizens involved in planning, we should always ask for more than a single story. And regarding the dominant stories, we should ask ourselves, 'who wants this story to be true or come true, and why?'

But there is more. Stories often get told after actors are confronted with or stumble upon new social and physical realities. Actors in planning practice are caught by surprises (small and/or big) on a daily basis. What we can find in planning processes are not just the hidden but also the emergent understandings of what is credible, beautiful, legitimate or feasible in the situation at hand. Storytellers do not necessarily come up with something totally new; rather, they comment, build or elaborate on the stories that are circulating. Stories and storytellers can suddenly enter the stage and gain momentum or lose their appeal because of the activities or events that interfere, or because of the reactions of important stakeholders or the general public. That is why it is useful for both practitioners and researchers to focus on the ongoing *storytelling* and not just try to reconstruct 'the' (conflicting) stories of a case as if they have been there all along. Using storytelling as a model for planning can, in principle, both enable less powerful actors to be heard and new shared understandings to emerge through dialogue between previously contending groups. When one explicitly uses storytelling in a planning process, it should, however, be connected to and have an impact on other activities for it to make a difference. And that is why we should see storytelling as a politically relevant planning activity only when the institutional design is flexible enough to really accommodate it.

There is more fieldwork needed to lay bare the broad range of examples of storytelling activities in planning processes. What is important is that what we do not expect a competition between two or more alternative stories that give distinctive and clearly opposing meaning to what is going on. The sense-making process is more complicated than that. Activities that are not designed as instances of collective storytelling, but that turn out to involve narrative sense-making anyhow, should be of special interest to researchers because they risk being forgotten as storytelling events. Think of all those meetings between politicians, citizens and planners that are hardly recognized occasions for storytelling and are, therefore, not treated as such by either practitioners or researchers. It is the way in which stories are related and how storytelling relates to other activities that help us to understand the actual role of storytelling in planning practice and the value of the concept for planning. After all, planning processes contain elements of political games and rational calculation, mixed with the emotions, imagination and improvisation.

We should envision new research in this direction as an ethnographic project. For further research into storytelling as it takes place all of the time, it seems most appropriate to combine theoretical work on storytelling in context with (ethnographic) fieldwork (Van Hulst, 2008b). That is to say, if we want to build a stronger theory of storytelling in planning, we should develop our theory in the context of the actual activities that make up planning as a practice and observe storytelling *in situ*. To see the work of producing stories and not just the products of storytelling (the stories themselves), we should not isolate stories but study story*telling* as an aspect of the messy, everyday action (Forester, 1992).[17] This way it can also become clearer what mechanisms obscure some stories and strengthen others and under what conditions communities themselves can benefit from storytelling.

## Notes

1. I thank John Forester for his comments and encouragement.
2. Narrative approaches fit in larger paradigms. Epistemologically and ontologically, they are most often connected to interpretive and social-constructivist ideas. These ideas are included in both critical-discursive and hermeneutic-phenomenological approaches (see e.g. Howarth, 2000; Yanow, 2000; Wagenaar, 2011). In planning, central ideas were formulated in volumes like the collection of essays edited by Fischer and Forester (1993), with contributions from people such as Healey (1993) and others. Central to the interpretive paradigm is the concept of meaning, or to use a more active phrase, *sense* or *meaning-making*. Sense-making is about the way '[s]ituations, organizations and environments are talked into existence' (Weick et al., 2005: 409). When human actors make sense of the situations they find themselves in, they are (implicitly or explicitly) concerned with two questions: *What is going on here?* and *What should we do?* To answer these seemingly simple questions, actors have to give meaning to the situation they are in. Although it is typically the second question that occupies those actors who are part of a practice like that of planning (Van Hulst 2008a), the answer to the first question sets the stage. Moreover, if actors want to be able to answer the second question, they will have to be able, to so some degree, to understand the answer to the first question. Put differently, actors cannot solve a problem unless they have some understanding (clarity is not necessary) of what the problem is. This is where storytelling comes in. The two questions of sense-making posed above have also been posed in a different but similar fashion when it comes to storytelling. The philosopher Macintyre stated: 'I can only ask the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"' (Macintyre, 1985: 216). Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005: 410) tell us that in the context of everyday life people confronted with something unintelligible first ask 'what's the story here?' and then ask 'now what should I do?' The argument is that sense-making takes the form of storytelling because actors in social life understand their lives in the form of stories. To put it differently, issues actors deal with in practice become meaningful because of their placement in a story (cf. Riessman, 1993: 18). As Schön (1993) said, '[e]ach story conveys a very different view of reality and represents a special way of seeing. From a situation that is vague, ambiguous, and indeterminate (or rich and complex, depending on one's frame of mind), each story selects and names different features and relations which become the "things" of the story – what the story is about.'
3. Following Riessman (2008), no distinction is made here between stories and narratives.
4. See for a similar statement, Barbara Eckstein (2003: 14): '[s]tories use language to frame what has happened to a set of characters in a particular time and place.' Eckstein also stresses that stories can make space for people to be heard and can have a defamiliarizing function.

5. Throgmorton's earlier publications (1992, 1996) focused on the storytelling surrounding a nuclear power plant construction programme in Chicago. In his later work (2003, 2007) he described a set of urban narratives told about urban areas in the United States.

6. Following Forester's way of looking at stories, she tells us that stories do a certain kind of work. She also honours Forester's contribution to planning, calling it 'an attempt to reshape planning as a practice of deliberative democracy' (Sandercock, 2003a: 23).

7. Forester has also described these applications of storytelling in what he called 'participatory rituals' (1999: 131).

8. Elsewhere, Sandercock (2003b: 154) also made an interesting distinction between micro-narratives (putting forward lessons learned along the way) and macro-narratives (carrying the overarching lessons).

9. Power has been an important theme throughout Forester's work. Throgmorton (2003: 131–132) engages the claim that his narrative approach would not appreciate matters of power. Revising the argument he made in his earlier work (1996), he states that 'powerful actors will induce some planners to devise plans (stories about the future) that are designed to persuade only a very narrow range of potential audiences' (2003: 146; see also 2007: 251–253). Sandercock (2003a) also deals explicitly with power and the limits of the power of storytelling.

10. Taking about metaphor, Yanow (2008) recently also used the idea of model of and model for. The echo of her thoughts on metaphor and other interpretive issues can be found in this article (see also Yanow 1996, 2000).

11. His first lengthy contribution to the approach (Forester, 1993) is especially noteworthy if we want to have a basic idea of what storytelling-in-practice is about, because there he showed how storytelling works at the level of conversation. This way of looking brings the approach close to the everyday experience of practitioners and other readers.

12. Here, research on storytelling and academic storytelling come close. Throgmorton (1996: 53–54), Forester (1999) and Sandercock (2003a) agree about the use(fulness) of storytelling in academia. Analysts reconstruct practice stories from their encounters with practitioners. Forester has also written profiles of practitioners who tell their practice stories. To support the research on practice stories, he and his colleagues also have created a website that shows the way in which practice stories can be reconstructed: http://courses2.cit.cornell.edu/fit117/ CP.htm. The acts of listening to and telling stories are what all of us (in practice, science or somewhere in between) have to engage in if we want to learn about practice. In addition, storytelling contributes to creativity in teaching and in writing about the planning practice. Often, however, storytelling in academia and in bureaucratic environments does not meet the standards of good fiction (Sandercock, 2003a: 21). In contrast with what is normal in mainstream science, Throgmorton (1996) clearly showed his own authorship and the way his research project connected with his personal experiences. In fact, this positioning was in line with the general argument Throgmorton made about planning. If planning is not 'detached and purely intellectual reasoning' (Throgmorton, 1996: 115), why would the science of planning be like that?

13. I made the name of the town anonymous. I chose the name Heart-less Town in order to refer to the problem (the town's lack of a centre/heart) as the locals identified it.

14. Scenarios, as Albrechts (2005) describes the concept, and visioning perhaps come closest to telling stories about the future. Some authors, however, treat them as separate from stories (Myers and Kitsuse, 2000). Stories, I would argue, could easily be found in scenarios and plans, although not all stories in planning are scenarios and plans since some are more focused on describing the problem at hand or dwell more on the past than they work to delineate a future course of action. Their future-directedness might remain rather implicit. In the case under discussion, for instance, setting the problem was a first narrative step, followed by more explicit talk about the future later on.

15. It should be clear that turning a complex description of the locations into a number between 1.0 and 100.0 (with a symbolic decimal point to indicate precision), helped to make the locations comparable in a very straightforward manner. All dimensions that could play a role are brought back to a single dimension (Stone, 2002: 176).

16. What the Alderman did looks a lot like 'narrative braiding' (Cobb, 2010), connecting different narratives in order to include the stories of more groups. But the Alderman's story was not the result of a process in which different groups were invited to tell their story themselves, as Cobb advised.

17. We should ground our analysis in 'careful accounts of the daily challenges of the actual work of planners, policy analysts, and public administrators more broadly' (Forester, 2006: 569).

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